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## THE ROUNDER ROGUE IN NEW YORK.

BY JACKSON KNOX,--"Old Hawk."



AT LAST SHE CAME TO A PAUSE, WITH A LITTLE SIGH OF RELIEF, BEFORE A DOOR SIGN.



# Old Grip, the Detective;

OR,  
The Rounder Rogue in New York.

BY JACKSON KNOX,—“Old Hawk.”

## CHAPTER I. OLD GRIP.

A YOUNG lady, beautiful, blonde, richly dressed, and with a general air of wealth, intelligence and refinement, was wandering among a wilderness of office-doors and office signs in the upper part of a great building not far from Wall street and Broadway, New York.

At last she came to a pause, with a little sigh of relief, before a door sign bearing this rather unique inscription:

“EDWARD GRIPPON,

(“Old Grip,”)

“Private Detective.”

“Come in,” said a soft, musical voice, in response to her knock.

And, as she entered a modest office, its sole occupant, a peculiar-looking man, rose from a desk near the window, and offered her a chair.

Could this soft-voiced, mild-eyed individual be the professional for whom she was in search?

His peculiarity was a pallid, hawk-like face, that seemed to indicate for its possessor almost any age from twenty-five to fifty. For the rest, he was athletic, unobtrusive and prepossessing, but altogether undetective-looking, according to the visitor's preconceived impression.

“Perhaps I have made a mistake, sir?” she began, a little nervously.

“Hardly, I think,” with an encouraging air. “You must have read my sign-board before knocking.”

“Yes, sir; but are you Mr.—Mr. Old Grip, the celebrated detective?”

“At your service, miss, though I won't answer for deserving the celebrity.”

“I shouldn't have thought it. Dear me!” in a scarcely audible murmur.

Then she accepted the proffered chair, the detective reseated himself at his desk, after a swift glance into the street below.

“I am afraid I don't often make a good first impression,” said he, with a smile that made him look like an under-graduate. “Perhaps it's because I don't look as *grippy* as is expected. What can I do for you, Miss Hardy?”

“You know my name, sir?” in surprise.

“I guess at it, from recognizing your family coach and pair in waiting. My memory is rather extensive, I may say photographic, for equipages, no less than for faces which being the case, Miss Hardy, you should have come to-day, on this sort of visit, in a cab that might have saved you being followed and watched.”

The young lady turned pale, and instinctively approached the window, when he pointed out a bushy-bearded, apparently careless individual on the opposite street-corner, who was, nevertheless, keeping an eye on the coach and pair drawn up at the building's entrance.

“It is Richards—my step-mother's footman!” exclaimed the young lady, indignantly. “I recognize him. This is shameful!”

“Speak lower, then, as he may presently have his ear at the keyhole yonder. Am I right in supposing that you desire my service, miss?”

She had resumed her seat, with a noticeably heightened color.

“Yes, sir, that is what I am here for.”

“It is a family trouble?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Give me a history of it, if you please. Whether you employ me or not, your communication shall be received in confidence.”

After preliminary hesitation, Miss Hardy succeeded in stating her case, to which the detective listened with a thoughtful air, that somehow seemed to make him look as old as Methuselah.

“I can get at the heart of this thing better by questioning you, I think,” said he, when she had come to a rather bewildered pause.

“I hope so, sir,” she replied.

“Your step-mother, the present Mrs. Wallace Hardy, was married to your father—when?”

“Two years ago, in Paris.”

“She had been a widow, the Lady Gladys Cholmondley?”

“Yes, or she had called herself so.”

“Neither you nor your brother, Leslie Hardy, was present at this marriage?”

“No—unfortunately!”

“Ah! I am to infer, then, that you dislike your step-mother?”

“No, I detest and fear her.”

“Fear, also?”

“Yes. I have money of my own, or she would make it harder with me than she does. As it is, she has secretly binted to my father that I were best off in a Lunatic Asylum.”

“And your brother?”

“That is the chief danger that brings me to you. He does not dislike or fear her, and my father is almost the only one not to see it.”

“I understand. You think the lady an adventuress, with fictitious antecedents?”

“I am sure of it!” eagerly. “My desire is to prove it, and to rescue my father from her sorcery is what brings me to you.”

“The asylum hint apart, she is inimical to you in other ways?”

“In every way, but always secretly.”

“But especially?”

Miss Hardy colored, but went on bravely:

“There is a gentleman—he loves me. She is plotting to deprive me of him, no less than of my brother.”

“I understand. His name?”

“Herbert St. John.”

“A prominent club man, and a fine character! I know him, as I know your brother Leslie, by reputation. Any other complication?”

“Yes; my brother might be betrothed to Herbert's sister—Mary St. John, my best friend,—but for this—this person?”

“Your step-mother is still young?”

“Under thirty—she confesses to twenty-six.”

“How shall I know her on sight?”

“By her singular, Gypsy-like beauty, and superb presence. She is beautiful,” but has a disfigurement, thought to be an additional charm by many. It was caused by a burn in infancy, and gives a continual smiling or arch expression to one corner of her mouth.”

The detective gave a slight start:

“What! the beautiful lady who is so often thought to be flirting for that reason?”

“It must be the same; though it is her misfortune, and not her intention. I give her credit for that much.”

“The Fair Lady Who Smiles!” said the detective, half to himself. “*La Belle Dame Souriante Mystérieuse! La Belle Sourcière Mystérieuse! La Belle Dame des Souris Glacé!*”

“I see you know something of my step-mother, Mr. Grippon.”

“Perhaps so; but why do you think so?”

“Those designations are the ones by which she has been known in the fashionable public. Club men, I am told, have come to allude to her by the first, as The Fair Lady Who Smiles. After her marriage to my father, we discovered that by the others, respectively, she was known in Paris—‘The Mysteriously Smiling Beauty,’ ‘The Mysterious Mouse-trap,’ and ‘The Beauty of the Frozen Smile.’”

The detective gravely bowed.

“I shall undertake your business, Miss Hardy, if you wish it.”

“I do wish it.”

“Tell me just what you would have accomplished?”

“Protection for myself against whatever injury may be designed for me; release of my brother from a baleful fascination; restoration of my father to the hale and wholesome vigor that was his characteristic before he was so hopelessly immersed in this serpent woman's enchantment. All of which, I am sure, can be effected by exposing her as an adventuress of vicious antecedents.”

The detective shrugged his shoulders slightly, but with the odd youthful look coming back into his enigmatical face.

“I am at your service, Miss Hardy. As a first step, I must become acquainted with your family circle. Does not your step-mother give a masked ball to-morrow night?”

“Yes.”

“Have an invitation sent to this address.” He wrote on a card and handed it to her. “I shall make my appearance as a Mephistopheles. Something may arise. Count on me, Miss Hardy.”

“Shall I pay you a retainer, sir?”

“No; should I need money you will be asked for it. Richards,” with a glance out of the window, “has not quitted his street-corner. Pay no attention whatever to the fellow. Good-day, Miss Hardy. Should you have occasion to visit me again, don't drive down here in your family coach.”

Miss Hardy took her departure, encouraged and hopeful.

As she was driven away, the disguised man, suddenly alert, was starting in pursuit when Old Grip, who had followed his fair client to the street without her knowledge, tapped him on the breast.

“That will do, my man!” said the detective, sharply. “Neither the carriage nor its occupant is in need of your further attention.”

The man—a swarthy, beetle-browed and immensely muscular fellow—fiercely resented the interception.

“Out of my way—I'm in a hurry!” he growled, in mingled anger and surprise. “I don't know you!”

“But I may know you; and you'll not follow that coach another rod.”

“The deuce you say!” and, with a contemptuous look at his seemingly insignificant *vis-a-vis*: “Hands off, or you'll rue it!”

With a lightning-like gesture the detective snatched away the fellow's bushy false beard and then suddenly closed in with him like a cat.

There was a brief struggle, and they went rolling down the basement-steps of a recently

vacated broker's office, landing in the tiled vestibule with Old Grip on top.

One stroke, and the burly spy straightened himself out with a jerking tremor.

“Get up!” commanded the detective, coolly rising himself.

The fellow did so after a moment with a crest-fallen but covertly murderous look.

“Now, Mr. Romany Ralph, a few words more and I have done with you—for the present.”

“What! you do know me, then?”

And Mrs. Wallace Hardy's old English family footman looked up uneasily.

“Just what I do, Rom.”

“How, when and where?”

No reply, save—

“Your sister, Mincing Meg?”

“What of her, curse you?”

“Is she also in the service of My Lady of the Frozen Smile?”

“Richards” put on a bewildered air.

“What are you talking about?” he growled.

“You know, and you will answer, too?”

“Ha! Don't be too sure of that, Mr.—Mr. What's-your-name.”

“You will answer.”

“Why will I?”

Old Grip bent his hawk-like face closer, with a menacing glare.

“Because,” and he whispered something parenthetically, “otherwise I shall hang you!”

Richards started, and for the first time he paled visibly.

“My sister is Mrs. Johnson now,” he answered, sullenly, “and she's my mistress's lady's maid.”

“That will do for the present, Romany Ralph, alias Richards.”

Then, as the detective stepped to one side with an ironical smile, the fellow darted up the steps and disappeared, making a peculiar sign over his head as he did so.

“What could that have meant?” thought the detective, cautiously following up the steps.

But he was passed by one of the under-janitors of the building, who had just emerged from one of the rear basement offices.

As this man set foot on the sidewalk, there was a whirling sound, a crash, and he fell dead, almost in the detective's arms.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE FROZEN SMILE.

A METAL sign, apparently torn from its fastenings high overhead by the strong wind prevailing at the time, had fallen upon the poor fellow with fatal effect.

A crowd was quickly gathered, together with a policeman, who telegraphed for an ambulance, though the man was already past praying for.

“Poor Tommy!” commented the janitor of the building at last; “he was a good man and a willing worker. Who'd have thought one of them insurance signs would ever have been blown off so sudden?”

Another policeman had just come up, puffing and red in the face.

“It wasn't blown off!” he cried, indignantly. “It was *thruwed* off, and with murderous intent, at that!”

The detective, who had maintained a somber and thoughtful silence, looked up with a start.

“How do you know that, Blake?” he demanded of the officer.

“I saw the dirty trick from yonder corner,” replied the latter. “The scoundrel gained the street, and made off like the wind, just after twisting off and flinging down the sign from the passage front just above. He stopped a second, though, to look at the poor fellow whose death he had caused, and there was a sort of horror in his face, as if he might have mistaken his man, and was sorry for it. I gave chase, but lost him in the crowd about the Stock Exchange.”

Old Grip's face had been growing sterner, and the far-away, ancient look had deepened in his strangely mobile face.

“What sort of a man?” he asked.

“Tall and slender, with red hair and a freckled skin. That was all I could notice before he was taking to his heels, with me after him.”

The detective said nothing more, but returned to his office, the majority of the idlers looking after his retreating figure with a species of respectful awe.

“That is Old Grip, the great detective!” said one.

“That is so,” put in another, “and I'd hate to have his grip on me, if I'd been doing anything shaky.”

The dead body had by this time been carried away, and only a small knot remained, of whom the policeman, Blake, a veteran officer, was one.

“But his name is Grippon,” observed a third.

“Why do they call him Old Grip?”

“Because he's a regular gripper, I suppose,” replied the first speaker, with a laugh. “They say his detective experience would fill volumes.”

“But he's been Old Grip in many another profession than his present one,” observed the policeman, who chanced to be in a talkative



mood with no repressive roundsman near. "As fireman, as railroad-man, as sailor, as circus-and-menagerie man, and perhaps in other adventurous capacities, they do say that Ed Grip-pon earned long ago the nickname which he has since rendered famous in private detective annals."

In the mean time the subject of these remarks had sunk down at his desk in a brown study.

"Can it be that my old enemy of the Frozen Smile is already on my track, and in sheer self-defense?" he thought. "It would seem so, and she is certainly intuitively deadly enough to take the initiative in any deviltry against me. However, no time must be lost."

He once more quitted his office for the street, locking the door behind him.

Miss Avice Hardy, after leaving the detective's presence, made two or three short fashionable visits for form's sake and returned home in time for lunch.

As she was alighting at her father's palatial residence in the vicinity of Central Park a small lad in the uniform of the District Messenger Service thrust a slip of paper into her gloved hand after which he darted away.

Greatly surprised, there was, nevertheless, a suggestion of secrecy in the affair that the young lady was willing to preserve.

On her way up the stoop she read the following words on the slip that had been so mysteriously thrust into her keeping:

"Do some shopping at Worth's, alone, this afternoon. I must communicate with you at once. Danger already in the air. *Destroy this.*"

"OLD GRIP."

Before the door could open in response to her ring she had torn the slip into many tiny bits, twisted them together and tossed them away.

At lunch she strove to be complaisant with her step-mother, was beamingly affectionate with her father, and, her brother Leslie also chancing to be present, she signaled him her wish to say something in private.

"You are arranging the invitations for our step-mother's ball to-morrow night?" she asked, when the opportunity came.

He nodded lazily, but in some surprise.

"Certainly," he replied. "Gladys—that is, Mrs. Hardy, was good enough to intrust the affair to me. But, of course, all the invitations have been sent."

"My dear brother, you have always liked me?"

"The deuce!" with a laugh. "But I don't like you a bit, Avice; I love you, as a brother should." And he kissed her affectionately. "But, what do you want?"

"An invitation sent to that address, without any one else being the wiser."

She handed him the card which the detective had given her.

"Count Mauritius Montalvo!" he read aloud, with fresh surprise. "Why, we've often entertained him at our club, though he was understood to have returned to Europe a week ago. Must have been a mistake."

"It seems so. Will you send the invitation?"

"With all my heart. But I was not aware that you even knew the count, you little sly-boots!"

"Must you know of every gentleman I may be introduced to at entertainments?"

"True. Well, I'll send the invitation from the club as soon as I get there," and Leslie, who had already donned his hat and overcoat, turned to go.

"You will not forget—you will not even tell anybody?"

"No, no, you little goose! not even—our step-mother!"

He lounged away with his short laugh, and some heightened color, for the fascinations of the step mother had often brought brother and sister upon the verge of downright unpleasantness, much as they loved each other.

"What! going out again, and so soon, Avice?" said a sweet voice, a few minutes later, as Miss Hardy, once more attired for the street, was threading the second-floor passage of the luxurious mansion.

Avice turned to perceive her step-mother standing at the entrance of her private suite of rooms.

"Yes," she replied. "I only made calls this morning, and shall do some shopping now."

"But you have not ordered the carriage, my dear; I shall have no use for it."

"Thank you, mamma; the public conveyances will answer my convenience quite as well this afternoon."

"You surprise me! But why not take the coach?"

Avice shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"Well, there would be the possibility of being followed, you know," and, with a slight courtesy, she passed on, and was gone.

The striking brunette beauty of Mrs. Hardy's face was disfigured by a frown of peculiar deadliness as she looked after the graceful, retreating figure.

But it was once more composed as she returned with a stately step to the superb boudoir interior she had just quitted; and, as she sunk

into a rich divan by her dressing-case, where a young woman of some comeliness was engaged in laying out some open jewel-cases in glittering rows, the unconscious coquetry of the "frozen smile" was distinctly visible as not the least of her many and undeniable charms.

Certainly a most fascinating and luxurious figure she appeared there in her rich, loose robe, her attitude of thoughtful abandon, and with the soft, roseate light of the boudoir enveloping her like a sensuous dream.

"Spread the gems before me here, Johnson," said she, languidly. "I am too lazy to look at them, standing, magnificent as they are."

She drew forward a low marquetry stand, and the woman smilingly rearranged the shining treasures under her gaze.

"Ah, there they are! the old Cholmondley jewels, interspersed with my fresh slave's newer gifts. Which shall I wear at the *bal masque* of to-morrow night? I am still undecided. Would that I might coruscate in them all, but I suppose that would be a little too venturesome, even for *La Belle Dame du Souris Glacé*. Put them away, and call Richards," with an impatient gesture. "Time enough between now and the event."

The lady's-maid obediently complied, with a covert smile at her mistress's capriciousness; and in a few moments Richards, the footman, stood alone before her.

"You followed Miss Avice?" demanded Mrs. Hardy, incisively.

"I did, my lady," was the rather sullen response.

"With what result?"

"Saving your ladyship's presence,"—ironically, as if his obsequiousness were a preconcerted farce between them—"with the devil of a result."

"Tell me everything," sharply.

He did so, without reserve.

Only the baleful burning of the magnificent black eyes betrayed the lady's smoldering resentment as he proceeded; the dark beauty of her face slowly hardening to the immobility of bronze, save for the flickering, phantom-like coquetry of that half-faced smile.

"So soon!" she murmured; "so soon, and when we were already taking advance measures against that inscrutable sleuth-hound of our fortunes! Fate itself would seem to have led the girl's footsteps to his door."

"It would seem so."

"How miserably unfortunate that your confederate's sign-board trick should have so miscarried!"

"Fate again, my lady. The man who was crushed to death by mistake—"

An interruptive gesture, whose contemptuous impatience would have seemed positively brutal, but for the incomparable hand and arm that made it.

"Pah! a chance worm in our path. Avice has just gone out again, ostensibly to do some shopping?"

"But really to keep a fresh appointment with the detective."

"Hal! How know you this?"

For answer he laid before her the fragments of the writing Avice had torn to pieces on the doorstep, save that now they were painstakingly smoothed out, pieced and pasted together.

A glance was sufficient, and then Gladys Hardy started to her feet, like a suddenly aroused leopard.

"Quick, Ralph, the carriage!" she exclaimed, fluttering up to the dressing-case in a species of wrathful energy that was magnificent. "Send Meg—or I should say Johnson—to me first, and then lose not a moment. We must circumvent the girl's second meeting with that Satan's Own."

"If possible," muttered the man, already at the door.

"Possible?" She turned upon him like a beautiful fury. "It must, it shall be! Nothing shall, nothing can step between me and my ultimate revenge upon that implacable man-hound!"

"One thing, possibly, Gyp."

"What is that?"

"Another reappearance of your first—that *bête noir* of your earliest clutch at the glittering prize of wealth, honor and position!"

She turned livid, reeling back against the bureau, her eyes darting fire, her jeweled right hand clutching at her breast as if searching for a dagger hidden there.

"He can't have tracked me hither, under my new name, and in my fresh splendor?" she gasped.

"Let us hope not. But then, he found you out in Paris and elsewhere—and you know what it cost to buy him off."

"True, true! Ralph—Richards—promise me one thing over again!"

"What is it?"

"If you see the marplot-reptile on my track again, kill him, hack him in pieces as you would a rabid beast, no matter when or where."

"That goes without saying, as the Frenchmen say—that is, with prudential reservations."

"Go, then, quickly! and send Johnson to me first."

As he vanished, she again fell back upon the

divan, panting and breathless, like a hunted but still ferocious animal.

But, when the lady's maid made her appearance, a few moments later, it was to find her mistress of the Frozen Smile thoroughly recomposed, and even selecting her driving toilet with calm dispatch.

### CHAPTER III.

#### ALL IN A DRY-GOODS STORE.

It so happened that Miss Avice Hardy was just finishing an instructive interview with a benevolent and venerable-looking old gentleman at a corner table of the restaurant connected with the Worth bazar, when her companion, whose spectacled eyes seemed to be everywhere at once amid the fashionable and mobile crowd, suddenly warned her, in a sharp whisper:

"Quick, Miss Hardy! Find occasion to desert me at once! You have been tracked, and the enemy is upon us!"

The young lady started, but was equal to the occasion.

"Ah! there are the St. Johns!" she murmured, and in an instant she had joined a handsome young lady, attended by a tall, aristocratic-looking young man, on the opposite side of the saloon; while the old gentleman so summarily deserted at his own insistence, who was of course Grip-pon in disguise, daintily folded his napkin in very old-gentlemanly fashion, and leisurely reached for his check and gold-headed walking-stick, though with his keen, masked eyes as actively alert as an Indian-fighter's in a foe-infested wood.

But the whole affair, notwithstanding that it had been performed with dispatch and address, had not escaped the cognizance of Mrs. Hardy, whose entrance into the crowded saloon at that moment, attended by her stalwart footman, had occasioned the separation of Avice and the detective.

But not the flutter of an eyelid, not the ghost of a change in her smile, betrayed her.

"What, Avice, you here, too, and with your charming friends?" she murmured, in excellently simulated surprise. "Richards, a bill of fare, and then bring me a waiter. A tiresome bore, this shopping; but then, one must eat and drink!"

And she had sunk into the very seat just deserted by her step-daughter (and which really chanced to be the only one unoccupied on that side of the saloon), with the benevolent old gentleman, who was now drawing on his gloves, as her *vis-a-vis*.

The detective had not been deceived by her unconscious manner, notwithstanding that he was now venturing upon dazedly admiring glances at her from over the rim of his gold-bowed spectacles.

"If madam will allow me?" and, with old-school politeness, he had gallantly offered her a bill of fare, while Richards was looking for a waiter.

"Thanks! So much obliged, I am sure."

And her lovely eyes filled with a soft, seemingly unsuspecting interest as she accepted the slight courtesy.

"Pray don't mention it, Mrs. Hardy," as he ceremoniously arose.

"What? You have the advantage of me, sir!"

It was one of the secrets of Old Grip's professional success that each of his many disguises was a distinct and admirable make-up or counterfeited of some actually existing character—in most cases that of some well-known man-about-town, or in the social sphere that he chanced to be operating in, always with the precaution that his prototype was at a safe distance, or with the smallest possibility of crossing his simulator.

He now smiled beamingly, with an old-fashioned bow, as he produced a silver card-case.

"The most distinguished beauty at Mrs. Rosecouleur's reception of a month ago," he simpered, presenting a card, "may well have forgotten many of those she unconsciously fascinated on that occasion. What can it be but an every-day occurrence to one whose charm is not only unforgettable, but immortal!"

The card bore the name "Stuyvesant Vanderhuysen," a pronounced and wealthy but harmless old beau known almost everywhere—though now supposed to be absent at his country-place—of whose style, manner and appearance the detective's make-up was a most perfect imitation.

Mrs. Hardy appeared delighted.

Her eyes warmed pleasantly as she glanced up from the perusal of the name, and her real smile, a beautiful one, effaced the perpetual, one-sided one to the revelation of the most perfect, even little teeth between crimson lips that were like parted coral curves.

"Ah, I remember! Has my step-son, Leslie, sent you an invitation for my masked ball, Mr. Vanderhuysen?"

"Alas, no! but then I am thought to be out of the city."

"It shall be attended to, if you wish it!"

And she held the card between the tips of her prettily-gloved fingers with a charming look of questioning hesitation.

"Wish it? Heavens, madam! is a call to



paradise wished for by the unhappy ones without the gates?"

She smiled sweetly at his senile effusiveness, as it might be called, and secured the card with playful avidity, while the return at this moment of Richards with the desired attendant, put an end to the comedy.

An instant later, though without other change in her amiable mien than a significant blaze in her peerless black eyes, she whispered sharply to Richards:

"Note the old gentleman who was just conversing with me."

"Yes, my lady."

And the liveried ruffian's eyes were upon the retreating figure as if they would devour it.

"He is our enemy in disguise—the remorseless detective!"

"Old Grip! Are you sure?"

"Peste! do I ever mistake?"

"Your orders?"

"Follow and kill him—now and here, in this very store, if the opportunity is accorded you. Quick! he is vanishing."

The footman obeyed and was close upon the object of pursuit as the latter was lost among the crowd at the entrance.

In the mean time Avice, who had remained with the St. Johns at an opposite table, but upon whom nothing had been lost, was both troubled and mystified.

What, she thought, could be the meaning of the pleasanties that had passed between her terrible step-mother and the *pseudo* old gallant, and why had Richards been so suddenly dispatched on the other's track?

All this apart from the mystery as to how Mrs. Hardy could have guessed of her appointment and tracked her to this out-of-the-way shoppers' resort.

A foreboding possessed her, notwithstanding the amiable smile from across the room where Mrs. Hardy, who was a good feeder, was already toying with some Blue Points on the half-shell, doubtless as a preliminary to something more substantial, and for all that her companions began to chaff her on her pre-occupied air.

"A penny for your dark thoughts, Avice, though doubtless they'd be worth far more on a speculation," said Herbert St. John, a tall, distinguished-looking young man, whose athletic figure and easy-going frankness of expression saved him from a somewhat dudish suggestiveness.

His sister, Mary St. John, however, a very attractive girl of Avice's own age, had been observing the latter more thoughtfully.

"You are really *distracte*, my dear," said she sympathetically. "Has Step-mamma Hardy been exceptionally spiteful of late?" with a resentful flash at the queenly figure across the room.

"Or was that old dandy, Mr. Vanderhuysen, retailing something particularly interesting when her entrance drove you into our arms?"

"Leaving him at the mercy of La Belle Mousstrap, of the Frozen Smile," added Herbert, also with a glance opposite, but in which, however, there was no little reluctant admiration, for Gladys Hardy was looking little short of ravishing in a superb latter autumn costume that fitted her *svelte* figure like a glove.

Avice forced a laugh of careless indifference.

"Oh, it is nothing!" she replied, lightly. "However, for reasons of my own, I am curious to see if Mr. Vanderhuysen returns to the saloon."

"You'll have time enough waiting with us," said Miss St. John. "Thank fortune, my purchases are done, and I am quite hungry. It was from the ribbon counter that I saw Herbert lounging along the promenade, and dragged him in perforce."

Herbert pretended to make a grimace, but it was easy to see that he was contented with his captivity, though perhaps more for Miss Hardy's than his sister's sake.

In the mean time, Old Grip, who seemed to have the faculty of seeing out of the back of his head, knew instinctively that his disguise had been penetrated by *La Belle Dame Souriante Mystérieuse*, and that he would consequently be tracked.

Therefore, the instant he was outside the restaurant saloon, he slipped to one side into a small compartment, the door of which was slightly ajar, and from which certain subdued, but more or less angry and protesting, voices were issuing.

As he did so, he glanced back and saw the sinister footman pass directly by the door, with swift, noiseless step and slightly lowered head, as if hot on what he evidently deemed the proper scent.

Greatly surprised, the detective, who had only partly entered the side-room, turned, and looked after the fellow down a long passage, comparatively deserted now, which, after crossing the broad stair-landing, seemed to stretch off interminably between piles of rich and other stuffs piled upon their cases at either side.

But horror! the cause of the scoundrel's misleading illusion was instantly apparent.

He was stealthily tracking an elderly, fashionable gentleman, who was strolling leisurely off down the interminable lane, wholly unconscious of danger, and that gentleman was, to all ap-

pearances, the detective's prototype, old Stuyvesant Vanderhuysen himself!

Was the man in real danger, and should he be warned forthwith?

Before Grip could decide this question, his own proper name, eagerly called in a feminine voice from the interior of the room behind him, caused him to turn.

Then he quickly reentered the room, closing the door.

A glance of his experienced eye was sufficient to explain the somewhat dramatic, if rather prosaic and every-day scene before him.

A case of shoplifting had just been brought home to a comely and handsomely-dressed young woman, and it was she who, penetrating his disguise, had just called him by name.

She was apparently covered with guilty shame and confusion, and an entreating look was in her eyes.

In full view were the stolen ribbons and cheap trinkets which had just been brought to light from their concealment upon her person.

On one side of her stood the female searcher, stern but half-pitying; on the other the regular detective of the establishment, hard-faced and complacent.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### MORE OR LESS TRAGIC.

"MR. GRIPPON—Old Grip!" called out the detected snoplifter, piteously, "you will befriend me, will you not? You will assure them that I am a respectable woman, in no need of those trumpery things that I somehow seem to have stolen?"

As the disguised professional thus appealed to stode up to the group his identity was likewise recognized by the store-detective, who made an unconscious obeisance, as if in the presence of a vastly superior being, while the searcher eyed him with an interested, not to say awed, look.

"Are these all that have been found upon the lady?" asked Old Grip, with a contemptuous gesture toward the pill-red trifles.

The employees bowed, while the pretty shoplifter flushed a yet deeper and more shame-faced crimson.

"Pure kleptomania in this instance, I can assure you! The woman is known to me. She is abundantly able to pay for such things, and could have had no possible use for them."

The store-detective again bowed, while the searcher made a gesture of dismissal.

"Your assurance is sufficient, Mr. Grippon," said the former. "On my own responsibility I proceed no further. The lady is at liberty—with a warning."

A moment later the released woman was alone with her deliverer in the passage without.

"Oh, sir!" she began, effusively, when an angry and imperative gesture stopped her.

"Enough! I had use for you, as you must have divined."

"Yes, sir," very humbly, but still with a sincerely grateful air.

"Otherwise, or had Boston Nell been recognized in her light-fingered character, it might have gone hard with you, eh?"

"Yes, oh, yes!"

He pointed to the restaurant door.

"Go in there, quick, and make the acquaintance of a beautiful woman, sitting to the left, with a perpetual one-sided smile. Then call on me to-morrow. Here is my address."

She took the card and submissively disappeared through the indicated door.

The detective then swiftly threaded the long passage in pursuit of his prototype and the latter's ominous pursuer, both of whom had disappeared ere this.

There was danger in the air, perhaps fatal though misplaced danger, but interference might not come too late.

It was too late!

When Old Grip had reached a point in the unfrequented passage whence a freight-elevator at its further end was in full view, a silent tragedy met his gaze that at first caused him to bound forward with a horrified imprecation.

Then he fell back, slipping into a nook among the cases at one side, speechless and remorseful.

This is the tragedy that had been enacted in the perspective.

The unconscious figure of the real Mr. Vanderhuysen—doubtless stricken senseless from behind the moment before—had just been dragged by Richards, his liveried assailant, and left at the edge of the elevator shaft, face down, with his head hanging over, at the instant that the heavy open platform of the contrivance, loaded with goods, but without any human occupant, was silently, swiftly descending from above!

Its sliding, close-fitting descent was as remorseless as the knife of the guillotine—its victim as hopeless as the latter's wretched prey, bound to the board, bended neck outstretched, the head-basket hanging below.

Time for interference! There was barely breathing space between the comprehension of what was taking place and its infernal accomplishment.

The murderer darted out of sight; there was a sharp click, a barely perceptible jerk of the machine, and, as the staging sunk out of view,

the human form prostrate at the brink was without a head!

With a face set like iron, though blanched with horror, Old Grip retraced his steps along the passage, and, hurrying down the staircase, disappeared amid the fashionable, rustling throngs of the lower floor.

At about the same time Richards reappeared in the restaurant before his mistress.

The latter had finished her oysters, and was chatting condescendingly with a comely, new-made acquaintance (Boston Nell), while now and then casting an urbane look from her bright eyes toward her charming, but secretly suspense-tortured, step-daughter, who was still with the St. Johns at the opposite side of the room.

Something, a curiously set look, in the swarthy footman's sinister face, instantly aroused Mrs. Hardy's curiosity.

"We may meet again," she said, rising, with a parting smile for her chance-met companion. "You say you desire employment, and can bring references?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!"

"Well, bring them to me when you choose. Here is my card."

And then she stooped her regal shoulders for the reception of her discarded wrap at the hands of her attendant.

"Well?" she whispered.

"The gripper is done for!" in the same tone.

An exulting flash in the beautiful face, but no more.

"You are sure?"

"I'll swear to it!"

"How, when and where?"

"His body lies at the edge of an obscure elevator shaft on this floor, his head in the basement!"

She gave him a swift and grateful smile.

Then she had crossed the room.

"Miss St. John, how well you are looking!" she murmured, while acknowledging Herbert's courtly bow, and playfully patting her step-daughter on the cheek. "Avice, my dear, as you have doubtless finished your shopping, you might as well drive home with me. Come," in a lower voice; "I have a grave, a saddening piece of intelligence for your private ear."

The last words were sufficient to arouse both Avice's curiosity and terror, and she hastily made her adieux to her companions.

"What can have happened?" she asked, on her way down the grand staircase with her step-mother.

Some porters and others had been observed darting hither and thither, with pale, startled looks, in the passage, and there was the general air of a desire to conceal something from the mob of shoppers.

Mrs. Hardy smiled sweetly upon her, with a backward glance at the obsequious and now thoroughly composed Richards, who was close behind.

"I shall tell you presently, my dear. It is something truly awful," with a *triste* expression, "and I chance to have it in advance of the others."

Avice's uneasiness was increased.

"Now tell me, please," she said, when they were in the carriage and fairly homeward bound.

Mrs. Hardy's sadness had deepened, but so had her composure, one might have said.

"Yes; but you must prepare yourself for something of a shock, my dear!"

"A shock?"

"Yes; that is, a sort of one. True," half to herself, "he could have been nothing more than an acquaintance, though perhaps an amusing one."

"What do you mean?"

"Your chatty old companion, Mr. Stuyvesant Vanderhuysen, whom you deserted for the St. Johns, leaving him momentarily to me."

"Yes," breathlessly.

"It is terrible," with impressment.

"What of him?"

"He is—dead!" in a low, sibilant voice, but with an eye flash of exultation.

Avice Hardy's face had blanched.

"You cannot mean it?"

"Alas, too well! Poor, harmless old gentleman! It was, it must have been soon after his quitting the saloon. A fit of apoplexy at the edge of the elevator shaft, in the unfrequented end of that long passage, and just as the heavy staging was descending like a knife. Frightful!" averting her face, with a seemingly involuntary shudder. "Decapitated in an instant! The body left behind, the head in the basement!"

It was a moment or two before Avice could rally from the horror of it all, but when she did it was with a startling result.

"Murderess!" she gasped, and then went on recklessly: "Yes, yes; it is just to you, Gladys Hardy—serpent-adventuress, who have writhed your way into the bosom of my honorable family to pollute and ruin it!—it is to you expressly that I address myself, and I repeat the accusing word—murderess!"

The outbreak was, perhaps, altogether unexpected, but, save for a slight stare from under elevated brows, Mrs. Hardy manifested neither surprise nor offense.

"You are violent and rash," she responded, quietly. "Suppose you explain."



## CHAPTER V.

## WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS.

"EXPLAIN! Don't fear but I shall do so!" Avie went on furiously. "How comes it that you know of this tragedy in advance of all others?"

"That is my concern, not yours."

"It shall be made the concern of the public!"

Mrs. Hardy leaned back, and laughed amusedly.

"This frightful news must have been brought to you by Richards!"

"As between you and me, granted."

"I saw him tracking the gentleman, after consultation with you—he was your murderous instrument!"

"You say so."

"You knew that the gentleman was not really Mr. Vanderbuysen—I saw that!"

"Granted again—as between us."

"You knew him instantly as the great detective, Grippon, in disguise."

"We will say so."

"Ah, the murderous incident of the sign-board is known to me, as are other things—the dogging of my movements on the part of your minion Richards, among the rest."

"My dear Avie, you are not only wise, but also wary, in your generation."

"Hypocritical, wicked woman!" the young girl buried her face in her hands; "you have caused Mr. Grippon to be murdered, my last, my only friend! Unhappy me!"

For some moments, as long as the young girl thus shut her out from view, Mrs. Hardy gazed at her with calm yet gloating exultation and satisfaction.

At last her expression changed. She suddenly leaned forward, and laid her firm grasp upon the young woman's trembling wrists.

"Look at me, and listen!" she sternly commanded. "That will do," as she was shudderingly obeyed.

"Avie, between us two, it is true. He, the sleuth-hound whom you would have put upon my track, is dead, violently dead, and at my instigation!"

"God of heaven! you confess it?"

"Ay, and more, worse than that, if you will, while glorying in it! Henceforth you are in my power!"

A spell of terror, no less than of horror, was upon Avie Hardy.

"Oh, I almost believe you!" she moaned, in a lost, helpless tone.

"You must, you shall believe me!" yet more sternly and imperiously. "Look to it how you comport yourself in the future. Your detective friend, through whose vaunted instrumentality you hoped to shake off the trammels of my power—to humiliate and conquer me—me, *la Belle Dame Souriante Mystérieuse*, the adventuress of two continents, the sorceress-beauty without a peer!—is dead, slain, and henceforth you are mine!"

The delicately-gloved grasp upon the trembling wrists suddenly tightened as with a clutch of steel.

Avie could scarcely abstain from crying out.

But at this juncture the carriage came to its destination with an easy lurch.

"Come!" continued that soft but terrible voice—the velvet scabbard of the blade of steel; "we have arrived. Descend with me—you are mine! Do not imagine," with a taunting intonation, "that Old Grip can arise from the dead to your continued defense."

But there was a response she little looked for. Richards was already holding the carriage-door open; with the collected, half-mocking look that usually glimmered through his obsequiousness.

Madame was stepping out, followed by her step-daughter, when the latter, with her feet just resting on the sidewalk, uttered an astounded, joyful exclamation:

"Old Grip—Mr. Grippon!" she cried, in a low, thrilling voice. "Oh, he is here—risen from the dead in my defense!"

Both mistress and man turned in the direction of her staring eyes.

There, between them and the stately stoop, with hat smilingly upraised, as if the act of a gentlemanly passing stranger, politely drawing back to admit of the unimpeded passage from coach to house, and in his own proper, unobtrusive personality, stood the dead-alive—Old Grip himself!

Richards, who was very superstitious, reeled back, livid and pop-eyed, with an inarticulate imprecation, to the no small surprise of the coachman, who was glancing down at the group from his seat on the box, and could of course see nothing startling in the situation.

Gladys Hardy had paled, but after the first quick breath, had lost no jot of her outward composure.

But it was Avie and not she who wore the quietly exultant smile a moment later when they ascended the stoop together, the cause of all this sensation having passed briskly on his way with a step the reverse of phantom-like or resurrectional.

"Some pig-headed *bêtise* of yours!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy to Richards in her *boudoir*, a few moments later. "There is no other explanation of it."

"Yes, there is, begging your ladyship's pardon," was the surlily ironical response. "Your penetration was at fault, and you must have put me on the track of the wrong man."

"Impossible! My penetration is never at fault."

"Ha!"

"You are insufferable! I don't believe you killed any man at all."

"I swear I did!"

"How is it, then, that the accursed detective is still alive?"

"I know no more of it than you. The live apparition of that man, who should be headless, struck me dumb and cold. There is but one explanation."

"What is that?"

"That there were two alike—the real old Knickerbocker, and his counterfeit, which Grippon was personating so successfully."

"And that you, by a fatal coincidence, tracked down the former to his doom?"

"Exactly."

Mrs. Hardy, who had only discarded her hat and wrap, pushed back the clustering raven-black masses from her temples, while a new uneasiness passed into her perfect face, almost to the total obliteration for the instant of her Frozen Smile.

"That would seem," she murmured, "like a stroke of Fate itself as against us—us that are, if anything, the mere creatures of Fate, by race and blood!"

"True, my lady!" in a voice so earnest as to forget its habitual irony. "And as against the Hand of Fate even the Zingari might struggle, intrigue and conspire in vain!"

But *La Belle Sourcière's* face had already recovered its resoluteness and coquetry.

"Send Johnson to me at once," ordered she, bestirring. "And lose no time in bringing me an explanation of this mystery. It behooves us more than ever that Old Grip should be forestalled by the Red Hand, and quickly—quickly!"

Richards had paused with his hand on the door.

"May I ask why now, more than before?" he inquired.

"Because, in my false security, I have already unmasked myself to Avie Hardy. Begone, and remember."

Richards vanished, and the comely, deft-handed lady's maid was speedily in obsequious attendance upon her *pseudo* mistress.

But the dinner hour was yet in abeyance, and Mrs. Hardy's toilet was more than two-thirds made for it, when, with a soft knock, the confidential footman again presented himself.

The lady's coiffure was receiving the last touches at the maid's manipulation when Richards laid in her lap a last *extra* of a sensational evening newspaper with its leading article upmost and marked.

It was a report of the startling tragedy of the afternoon in the fashionable drygoods mart, whereby the wealthy and well-known gentleman-about-town, Mr. Stuyvesant Vanderhuysen, had met an unusual and shocking fate, probably from being taken with an apoplectic fit in an unfrequented nook of the second floor at the edge of the freight elevator shaft.

Gladys looked up after a perusal of the horrifying details without visible emotion.

"Anything else?" she inquired.

"Yes, my lady."

And then a card was laid in her lap.

It was her own visiting-card with a few words, signed Eleanor Williams, penciled on the back.

"Who gave you this, Richards?"

"The young woman you condescendingly gave your card to in the drygoods restaurant two hours ago when I was assisting you with your wrap."

"Ah! she is below, and so soon?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Bring her to me."

And as he disappeared she also dismissed with a few words Johnson, who, having finished the coiffure and smuggled some jewels out of sight, retired, but remained within call.

Boston Nell, with a demure and modest look, was the next moment alone in Gladys Hardy's presence.

"I hardly expected you to take advantage of my chance offer so soon," said the latter, with kindly condescension.

"Alas, I feared as much, noble madam!" in a low, diffident voice, no less ingratiating than the words themselves.

"Have you, then, your references?"

"Not yet, ma'm; there has not been time; but—"

"Go on," encouragingly. "But what?"

"Madam's masked ball of to-morrow night is already the subject of widespread and flattering anticipation among the *élite* of madam's sphere."

"Doubtless," with a faintly pleasurable flush. "Well?"

"And I, having fortunately had experience as a costumer's apprentice—well, I ventured to think I might make myself useful first and bring my references later."

Gladys Hardy was yet more complaisant.

"Your expertness may be put to the test at

once, Miss Williams. It chances that I am not altogether pleased with any of the several dominoes I shall wear."

Johnson reappeared at a signal, and then produced four superb silk dominoes of various hues and fashionings.

First, with her maid's assistance, Gladys, who had until now been in a rich *negligée* wrapper, assumed her evening dress, a superb garnet satin trimmed with black velvet, not forgetting brooch, necklace and bracelets of costly diamonds, in addition to the magnificent solitaires that had already glistened at her ears, while her fair fingers were literally loaded with rare rings.

Yet it was but an ordinary dinner dress, such as she customarily wore to enhance the spell of her proud Oriental beauty for the especial benefit of her doating husband, if not for one other no less, and that other her bewildered step-son, Leslie Hardy.

At sight of the diamonds a look of fairly savage cupidity had leaped into Boston Nell's eyes, to be replaced on the instant, however, by her demurely respectful, if naturally admiring, expression.

Then Gladys enveloped herself in one of the dominoes, an embroidered gossamer of scarlet silk, and darted an inquiring look through the eyelet-holes of the accompanying mask.

"Don't be afraid to criticise freely from your experience, Miss Williams," said she. "Is the domino at fault in the slightest particular?"

"In many particulars—that is, as to make, for the material is rich beyond words," was the bold reply. "It could be made to float and hang with infinite more expression for madam's exquisite figure."

And the visitor, whose costumer's experience was at least no sham, stooped about the muffled form, explaining the alterations that could be made to advantage here and there with both tact and intelligence.

Mrs. Hardy was not displeased.

The other dominoes were assumed one after another with like result. All were more or less at fault, and yet might be altered to artistic advantage.

"Miss Williams, I am satisfied you know of what you speak," was Gladys's judgment, as Richards came to say that Mr. Hardy was waiting to conduct her to dinner. "Could you make the suggested alterations in time for the ball?"

"With no time lost, yes, ma'm," was the prompt response.

"Very well. Leave me your address, and return here in one hour's time, and you shall set to work at once. Time enough for references after the ball."

The unsuspected shoplifter did as requested, bowed her humbly-delighted acquiescence, and was gone.

"Imprudence! folly!" muttered Johnson, in a low, contemptuous tone, as her mistress was sweeping out of the boudoir, after a parting back-glance in the full-length pier-glass.

"What do you mean, Meg?" and Gladys turned upon her, though without indignation.

"What I say, sister mine."

"But why?"

"You should have demanded her references first—if she has any."

"Nonsense!"

"But you didn't see her eyes fasten on the jewels. A wolfish glance, and a revelation!"

"I don't believe it. Besides, the girl is to be employed in no confidential capacity, and may, moreover, be watched."

But, had our Lady of the Frozen Smile dreamed of Eleanor Williams's real vocation, to say nothing of her being Old Grip's spy in the luxurious camp of his enemy, she might have passed on her way with a less assured confidence of mien.

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE MASKED BALL.

THE *bal masque* at the palatial Hardy mansion was at its height.

Few New York homes, even among those of the ostentatiously rich and proud, could have been better or more sumptuously designed for such a grand and fashionable crush than that of the retired merchant prince, whose young wife was thus making her formal *début* into the *crème de la crème* of metropolitan society with so much *élan*, *éclat* and such utter regardlessness of expense.

There were considerable gardens and vast conservatories, no less than magnificent drawing-rooms, spacious reception apartments, a dining-hall of baronial proportions, and suite upon suite of rarely-appointed upper rooms, for accommodation of the brilliant and mobile throngs, most of them *en domino*, and not a few in fancy or character dress.

And yet, though it was now bordering on midnight, equipage after equipage was landing its fashionable occupants at the carpeted, awning-arched passage, which, like a brilliantly-lighted and flower-hung fairy tunnel, led them up to the carved and stately house-entrance fronting the Park.

The external display was the wonder of outsiders, no less than of the arriving guests.



Electric-lights flashed their sun-like shafts of light far up and down the avenue from either side of the vestibule portals. Every window was ablaze, the many-hued glitter of costly Chinese lanterns could be glimpsed here and there, like gigantic fireflies and glow-worms, in among the trees and shrubberies lifting their dark, rustling masses over the jealous garden-walls, or through the crystal domes and amid the fountain-sprayed palms, magnolias, towering cacti and the rare exotics of the conservatories. Wild waltz music poured with a species of delirium out upon the calm, warm air, for, though late in the season, it was an ideal Indian Summer night. The rhythmic tread of the dancers was distinctly heard amid the voluptuous dying falls of the music, the murmur of their happy voices was like the murmur of the wind amid enchanted woods, and one could almost hear the rustling of the silken skirts beneath the floating folds of gossamer-like yet mysterious dominoes.

But if such were the effect from without, what must it have been to the favored participants of the glittering and varied scene within?

It was beauty and wealth at high carnival, a gala night of fashion, frivolity and fortune!

Prominent among the sporting throngs was a lithe, graceful, athletic figure, the floating openings in whose airy black domino, as he danced and flitted here and there, revealed the red-slashed doublet, velvet trunks, scarlet hose and pointed buskins of a conventional Mephistopheles.

Now he was whirling an unknown fair one through a few evolutions of the giddy waltz. Now he was whispering pleasant nothings into some fresh masked beauty's delicate ear. Now he was exchanging pantomimic comicalities with a lusty Merry Andrew or flirting Columbine as care-free and eccentric as himself. And now again he would be flitting like a veritable genius of mysterious but inconsequent mischief through the crowded supper-rooms, the gleam-lit garden or the flirtation-haunted conservatories, with a whispered quip for this group or for that.

Who and what was he? It was a question often self-put, but as often unanswered.

Nevertheless, there was a restless and searching glitter of dark eyes through the Mephistophelean unknown's mask that might have given the lie to his airy carelessness of mien, had those among whom he flitted been more studiously observant.

At last he found himself a little apart from the rest and at the side of a graceful domino, who had apparently signaled him after falling out of the waltz.

"It is you?" he asked, in a low and cautious voice.

"Yes," was the reply, in the unmistakable melody of Avice Hardy's voice, but with equal caution. "Any developments yet?"

"Not yet, but there may be before the hour fixed for the unmasking. One o'clock, is it not?"

"Yes; but what do you anticipate?"

"I scarcely know myself—as yet."

"But what makes you anticipate any disclosure to my step-mother's disadvantage?"

"Her manner from the very opening of the ball."

"Ah! I have myself noted her secret uneasiness, through all her outward gaiety."

"I have lost track of her for twenty minutes. Has she changed her domino again?"

"Yes; there she is now—the dark-blue one, sown with gold and silver stars."

"Ah!" and the disguised detective glanced in the direction indicated.

Gladys Hardy's statuesque peerlessness of figure it would have been difficult to wholly conceal by any number of cunning disguises.

She had just paused momentarily at the upper end of the thronged apartment, queenly in her magnificent beauty, notwithstanding her half-mask, which still betrayed the flickering coquetry of the Frozen Smile, and there was a sort of court of both sexes in attendance upon her.

"Ah! and the modestly graceful black domino in such close maid-of-honor-like companionship?"

"A costume-fitter, Eleanor Williams, who first came into my step-mother's employ last night. It is unaccountable."

"I should say so. A mere servant?"

"Yes; but that is nothing. You perceive the man and woman, also in black, but with distinguishing features, in yet closer attendance?"

"I do."

"They are Richards and Johnson—her ladyship's old English family servants, you know."

"Ha! Romany Ralph and Mincing Meg?"

"What are you saying?"

"A slip of the tongue to be accounted for to you, Miss Hardy, in the future."

"But your words would imply an intimacy with strange antecedents on Gladys's part."

"Question no further now, I beg of you. So, this odd body-guard *en masque* corroborates her ladyship's forebears of impending danger."

"However, one of the attendant sprites is there in my interest—I can tell you that much, knowing your discretion."

"How? which one?"

"The one you first called my attention to—the costume-fitter."

"Who is she?"

"My secret agent and spy!"

"What more?"

"Eleanor Williams, alias Boston Nell, one of the cleverest shoplifters in America."

Avice, already astonished, flushed beneath her mask.

"You would introduce such a character into my father's house?"

"Certainly, when that house is the enemy's camp, and fire is to be fought with fire. But she will not dare to filch so much as an eardrop while here as my agent. Remember that!"

"But—"

"Allow me to interrupt you."

And he briefly explained his chance-service to the shoplifter, having already hinted how it had probably saved his life from the drygoods store assassin, to the sacrifice of poor Mr. Vanderhuyzen in his stead.

"Still," murmured Avice, after a moment's muteness, "must you use such instruments, Mr. Grippon?"

"It is indispensable when dealing with such artful and dangerous criminals as Gladys Hardy and her minions. You will discover that for yourself before long."

"Criminals? Is she one?"

"I hope to prove her such. But our conference is already attracting attention. Here comes to offer himself a partner, with whom you might disappear for the present."

"Ah! it is Herbert St. John."

And as she bowed her acceptance of the new arrival's deferential petition for a dance, the detective, with his Mephistophelean privilege, uncereemoniously caught up a disconsolate shepherdess who was passing, and also whirled away with her in the vortex of the waltz which was now at its giddy close.

A polka quickly succeeded it, however, just as the detective found himself in the vicinity of Mrs. Hardy and her retinue.

The next moment he had significantly touched the hand of a comely black domino, one of the "body-guard," made his characteristic bow and was off with her amid the seductive mazes of the new dance.

Gladys had started to interfere, but was just too late, and, moreover, Mephistopheles polkaed to such perfection as to quickly challenge her admiration.

"Who is the satanic unknown who makes himself so pleasingly conspicuous everywhere?" she asked of Leslie Hardy, who at that moment approached in the character of a Charles II. courtier.

"I suspect him as Count Montalvo, to whom I sent an invitation in the eleventh hour," was the reply.

"The rich count? I understood he had returned to Italy."

"The general impression, but doubtless a mistaken one. Gladys!" in a low, thrilling voice.

"Well?" warningly.

"You will give me at least one dance?"

"Not one, step-son mine."

"But you have danced several times with others."

"To keep up appearances, you jealous boy! Where is your father?"

"In the card-room, I think; but no, he is approaching."

This with half-savage discontent, as a tall, portly figure in the character of Henry VIII. was seen eagerly approaching.

"That will do, Leslie!" and Mrs. Hardy laughed with well-counterfeited joyousness as she advanced a step to meet her husband.

## CHAPTER VII.

### MEPHISTOPHELES.

In the mean time, Old Grip and his fresh partner, who was none other than Boston Nell, and who danced almost as well as he, were not so engrossed with their fascinating pastime as not to exchange confidences without delay.

It was the first time he had had speech with her since her gaining entrance into the house, under his instructions.

"You seem to have already wormed yourself into my lady's confidence."

"Yes, and I may succeed even better, since she seems to take to me naturally. There will be only one obstacle to my complete success."

"What is that?"

"I am at present on mere probation, without the references which I have promised to produce to-morrow."

"That shall be satisfactorily arranged. Now for the details of your initial step."

Nell gave them in as few words as possible, which was rendered necessary by the Terpsichorean jerkiness of the whispered conversation.

"You have done well," commented the detective. "Now, why is it that you and the two servants are here in attendance on Mrs. Hardy?"

"It is at her command. She seems to fear something in secret."

"Can you imagine what that something is?"

"No, but it comes of a letter she received at

noon, just before giving us our unusual instructions."

"A letter?"

"A most filthy-looking one, externally at least."

"It disturbed her?"

"Greatly; and, with all her tact, she could scarcely conceal that it did."

"Could you not purloin the letter?"

"No, or it would be now in your hands. She burned it with the utmost care directly after crushing it in her hand."

"Enough. Neither Richards nor Johnson suspects you?"

"I think not, though the woman hates me instinctively."

"So much the more reason for your redoubled caution."

"I know what I am about, Grip."

"Good! How do you account for your ingratiating yourself with her ladyship so easily?"

"How should I know? But I am not without tact. Besides, there may have been a mysterious, unconscious fellowship of feeling, you know."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That one adventuress naturally scents another—knows her by a sort of sympathetic instinct. And, for all her position and jewels, I would bet my head that that woman has known vicissitudes as base, if not as criminal as my own."

"Humph! it is to prove just what you divine that you are here in my service."

"I thought as much."

"You mentioned her jewels. Have you," with a stern look, "managed to withstand light-fingering temptations in that regard?"

"I have."

"No evasion with me, Nell!"

"I would not dare deceive you, Mr. Grippon. I have withstood the temptations you allude to, though at a hard battle. Would you think that I have forgotten?"

"Forgotten what?"

"Not only your recent service, but still more your generosity to me and my child when my burglar-husband was dying of his wounds in the Massachusetts jail. Thief I may be, but I am not ungrateful."

She spoke with passionate sincerity.

"So! and your little boy?"

"Is fairly well off in a benevolent institution in this city."

"Eleanor Williams, listen to me. I am not enlisting merely your gratitude in my interests. Serve me but faithfully—with no relapse into your criminal propensity—and a much more substantial reward shall be yours than the cribbing of all her ladyship's diamonds could net you at the fence's and pawnbroker's."

"I shall take your word for it, sir."

"Do so. I can promise that, in event of our success in unmasking this beautiful and dangerous woman to her undoing, Miss Avice Hardy will permanently provide for you, besides securing an honorable future for your little boy."

Such of his partner's face as could be seen flushed brightly, something very like a tear stole into view, and, the polka just then coming to an end, he felt a last grateful pressure of her hand, as he led her to a seat, with a significantly-whispered "Remember!" in his parting bow.

Then he was flitting here and there again, with a resumption of his agreeable eccentricities.

But, a little later, when another waltz was being called, it was before Gladys Hardy herself, in the midst of her suite, that Mephistopheles made his beseeching obeisance.

"Ah, Madam the Queen!" he murmured, with a disguised sweetness of voice and in picturesque broken English; "it is from my sovereign Pluto's court that I venture to beg your gracious and peerless condescension for this gallop."

Gladys had adored dancing, and the unknown supplicator had interested her from the outset, but she affected to hesitate. Moreover, her curiosity was excited, and she was not displeased that her costume-fitter should already have enjoyed him as a dancing partner, *incog*.

She glanced at her martial personator of royalty, with mock deference, to receive a bow of indulgent acquiescence; and then at her step-son, whose answer was an ill-concealed jealous scowl.

Then she had smiled, taken position with the unknown, whose close-cut, black-shining Italian head was his sole appearing facial characteristic, and the next instant was floating off in the mad if rhythmic whirl under his passionately respectful guidance.

"Corpo de Bacchio!" muttered her partner, in his broken way; "but this is the waltz!"

"Your own waltzing is incomparable, sir," muttered she, whose step was likewise little short of perfection. "But you compliment me too highly."

"You would depreciate yourself—you that are perfection! I swear it, by the Madonna's self!"

"But, really, do I dance as well as the lady who performed the polka with you?"

"Madame's maid-of-honor danced well; madame's dancing is the divinity of art."



She was, indeed, revolving royally, the diamond tiara flashing above her brow, diamonds also betraying themselves at throat and bosom with the fluctuations of her rich domino's folds, her magnificent figure instinct with the music, as if the expression of its dreamy, sensuous soul.

Gladys, wholly unprincipled, was as susceptible to masculine impressions as a Gypsy to the moonlight. She might be said to hunger for them.

The eyes that were looking into hers through the unknown's mask were fairly devouring her, and they were like living coals. She was in his embrace, as privileged by the waltz, if not a trifle more so. She not only seemed to surrender herself to this unknown's perfect dancing as never before to any other partner's, but her eyes blazed a response, her frame thrilled, her bosom rose and fell.

"Ah! but how can I take you *au sérieux*, count—you who have left such a name for gallantry behind you, before seeming to disappear from among our fashionables?"

The hand at her waist trembled

"What! madame divines?"

"Yes; for we have met at other entertainments."

"But never at such a magnificent one as *Madame la Belle Dame Souriante Mystérieuse* spreads to-night for her enchanted guests."

"Thank you. You really like my *fête*?"

"It is incomparable! Never beyond the sea, in palaces of kings, have I seen it surpassed."

He could see the proudly pleased color deepen in her face, softly deepening down even below her mask.

"I must thank you again, count."

"For speaking the truth? By no means, dear lady. Still, I cannot be known to you."

"Oh, I am sure of it! You are Count Mauritiu Montalvo."

Again that seemingly telltale tremor at her waist.

"You will confess that I am right?" she went on, gayly.

"To any other lady than madame, no; to madame herself I dare not make the denial."

"Count, you are charming."

"Oh, madame!"

"But why would you of necessity admit your identity to me alone?"

A nervous trembling seemed to possess his entire frame. They were in the maddest phase, the delirium of the *galop*. She was almost upon his breast. Their eyes met again with burning and reciprocal intensity.

"Do not ask—do not ask," he repeated, huskily, "for I dare not answer. Here in America your etiquette is so rigid, your convenances so prudish."

"Imagine us elsewhere then—in France, Russia, Italy—and answer me."

"Ah! madame would be shocked—might wish to strike me dead."

"I shall not—have no fear!" This in a low, thrilling voice, for the woman's unscrupulousness could master her at times. "Why, count, should you make a preference of me over others?"

"My God! can madame ask? Is she blind to the spell that is cast by her beauty, her magnetism? Oh, madame, have pity!"

"Hush! I am not displeased, count. Am I right in deeming that your pretense of going back to Italy was prompted by prudential motives, and that you wish the deception to continue for the world at large?"

"Madame is right."

"Stay! and do not regard me too earnestly again."

The waltz was in its dying throes. The hand that rested upon his shoulder was ungloved, with the glove clutched in its gem-loaded fingers. With a movement that was almost sleight-of-hand, she managed to detach one of her most costly rings, and slip it into his hand.

"It is a temporary token of my—esteem," she whispered, hurriedly, with a last glance that was sufficiently significant. "Count Montalvo, whether you would remain *incognito* or not, we must meet again."

A parting pressure of the hand was his response.

The waltz fell away to its death in a last delirious swoon, and the next moment she was alone among her minions and admirers, the *pseudo* count had bowed himself off with an obsequious murmur for the graciousness accorded.

"You are venturing boldly," commented Avic Hardy's voice in the detective's ear as he found himself in a distant corner of the rooms.

"Yes, Miss Hardy," replied the detective-Mephistopheles. "It has been all or nothing with me to-night, for such an opportunity may not occur again."

"How are you succeeding?"

"Admirably."

"I suppose your dance with the costume-fitter was to renew your instructions to her?"

"It was. Have no fear. Nell will perform her rôle without shaming your house. You can trust her for that."

"I have the most perfect confidence in any measures you may take."

"Thank you."

"But you have also just danced with my step-mother."

"Of course."

"With what result?"

"A graver one than I anticipated."

"How?"

"She really imagines me to be the *bona fide* Count Montalvo."

"What of that?"

"But she also does me the honor to—to be uncommonly gracious."

Avic did not reply, and the detective divined that there was a troubled look on the sweet face behind the mask.

"You are uneasy," said he, "and I can guess the reason why."

"Why, then?"

"You dread the effects of Gladys Hardy's fascination upon me—Old Grip."

"I own it."

"Have no fear."

"She is no less unscrupulous than transcendent in her beauty."

"Granted. But have no fear on my account. It is Count Montalvo, not Old Grip, who has made the impression."

"I dismiss my fears."

"That is well. But is there to be no more dancing?"

"Not until the unmasking, which will be signaled in five minutes."

"But, where is madame—I do not see her now?"

"I saw Richards whisper to her an instant ago, and then she hurried off in the direction of the conservatories."

"Ah! perhaps to arrange for signaling the unmasking after some original conceit of her own."

"It is possible."

But, a moment later, the signal was given by Mr. Hardy himself.

There was a general disclosure of faces and a great rustle of excitement, mingled with bursts of merriment and surprised exclamations.

But all was suddenly hushed by a piercing scream from one of the remotest recesses of the adjoining conservatories.

#### CHAPTER VIII.

##### IN THE CONSERVATORY.

"It has come!" whispered the detective into Avic's ear, and he was one of the first to dart into the conservatories.

There were many to follow, for the shrill cry had been generally recognized as Mrs. Hardy's, and more or less consternation prevailed.

She was found white and disheveled, her mask and rich domino clinging in rags to her gorgeous person, as if newly torn aside by a rude and disrespectful clutch.

At her feet, and apparently writhing in his last agonies, was a man, still clutching in one hand a partly emptied bottle of champagne.

The place was a secluded nook, between an end-rockery and a magnolia clump, with an open glass door near at hand; and he might have slipped in there surreptitiously from the garden, after climbing a rear wall of the latter from an adjoining alleyway.

The man was a tatterdemalion, the veriest tramp in appearance, with bloated, brutal features, that were now hideously convulsed, but his dazed, bleary eyes were fixed upon the beautiful woman with a fierce intensity of baffled hatred and revenge.

"What is it?" demanded Mr. Hardy, one of the foremost of the intruders upon this strange scene. "Gladys, speak! Is the fellow dying? Did he affront you first? And how came he here?"

Gladys had by this time partly recovered her composure.

"Alas, Wallace, how should I know?" she replied, answering the last question first. "I suppose he stole in here by some means."

"But how did you discover him?"

"I was crossing the conservatory, when his groans brought me to the spot. I supposed he had filched the wine from one of the cellars opening up into the garden. He had just taken the bottle from his lips, and seemed in unaccountable agony. Notwithstanding my bewilderment, and in spite of his repulsiveness, my heart was touched. But as I approached he undertook to seize me, and I only eluded him at the expense of my domino and mask. Then I screamed out."

"Time you did!" said the old gentleman, tenderly, while the crowding guests looked or murmured their admiration for Mrs. Hardy's unusual goodness. "John!" to a wondering servant, peeping in at the garden door; "fetch some of your mates and then summon a policeman and an ambulance."

But at this instant the writhing wretch, though already in *extremis*, struggled tottering to his feet.

Froth was on his lips, his glazing eyes were fixed on Gladys with a terrible look.

"She lies, lies, lies!" he gasped. "Serpent from hell! now, as in the past, she lives on perfidy and falsehood! What does she here, in fine robes and jewels? She has no right to them. She is my—my—"

The revelation, whatever it might be, died

away in a rattling of the throat, and he fell to the ground a corpse.

"Poor wretch!" faltered Gladys, with an amazed look out of her composure; "what delirium could have possessed him? Why, it stands to reason that I could never have seen him before in my life!"

"Of course it does," said Mr. Hardy. "Here, you fellows! has the policeman come?"

The man had fallen dead with his head at the detective's feet, while the bottle, falling from his clutch, had rolled noiselessly away under the hem of Eleanor Williams's skirt.

None but she and Old Grip seemed to have perceived it, and the latter gave her a look whose significance was happily understood.

The latter stooped to draw up her skirts, preliminary to a retreat, and when she had taken herself off, together with many others of the group, the bottle had disappeared.

Among the last lingering group about the fatal spot, after the body had been borne away were Gladys, her husband, her step-son and some others, including the pretended count.

The last-mentioned was as thorough a copy of his prototype (whose appearance, characteristics and idiosyncrasies he had had occasion to studiously observe when the real count had been a prominent feature of fashionable and club life a few weeks before) as he had been in the case of unlucky Mr. Vanderhuysen.

Gladys had thoroughly recovered her baughty self-possession, and now, having cast aside the shreds of her mask and domino, was a miraculously-brilliant creature of silks, laces and flashing gems.

"Come!" cried her Henry VIII. husband, a little impatiently; "why are we brooding here when our ballroom, which should now be at its best and giddiest, awaits us. Come, Gladys."

And he gallantly offered his arm to a pretty society woman who chanced to be at his elbow, Leslie Hardy following his example with Mary St. John, a very sweet-looking girl, who, however, seemed to accept the courtesy with no little coldness.

"With all my heart!" said Gladys, bringing up the rear of the little procession with the pretended count, whom a slight glance had brought to her side with well-assumed eagerness. "Let it be 'on with the dance' from this time forth, for our festivities should be but now fairly begun."

In an instant, however, she had shrunk back, drawing her companion with her, and they were thus left momentarily alone.

"What can have become of that stolen bottle the poor suicide drank his death off?" she exclaimed, in a low, uneasy voice, her eyes wandering searchingly over the fatal ground. "It must have rolled away when he fell. I cannot see it anywhere."

"Why should the signorina trouble herself about such a trifle?" and her companion even ventured to pat the shapely gloved hand that was still within his arm.

"But don't you see, count?" with imperfectly-mastered anxiety. "The poor man must have poisoned the wine before drinking—a dash of fatal white powder would have sufficed—and now, should one of the servants have carried off the bottle for what wine might be left in it?"

"I understand, but believe me, dear lady, the thought is preposterous. There could scarcely have been poison in the case."

"You think so, count?" eagerly.

"Pouf! what else could any one else imagine?"

"But the man's death?"

He smiled.

"The effect of a crowning debauch upon a system, doubtless already impoverished, brutalized and at death's door. Why, the fellow—pah!—was but a bloated wreck! Come; let me beseech you, dear lady, to think no more of it. A worthless tatterdemalion, an unknown tramp, one of the veriest dregs!" And this time he even pressed the pretty gloved hand.

"But will all others think as you do, count?" suffering him to lead her slowly away.

"What else can be possibly thought? Ah! madame, that divine waltz! I was in heaven!"

She had recovered sufficiently to turn her glorious black eyes upon him with a softened light.

"You shall have another with me presently," she murmured, though at the same time sinking into a luxurious conservatory seat not far from the communicating doors, yet somewhat shut away by bowing plants and vines. "I feel a little faint now."

"Wait!"

He vanished, quickly returning with delicate morsels and a bumper of champagne.

"How kind and good of you!" in a low voice, after disposing of the wine, with many a speaking, underlidded glance over the goblet's brim. "Ah, count! the woman that finally wins your undivided devotion and—and personal attractions will have occasion to congratulate herself."

The count seemed fairly beside himself at these encomiums, supplemented as they were by fresh glances and the contact of her rich skirts, which almost hid away his knees in their rustling voluminousness.



His eyes glistened, he flushed through his crisp beard, he wrung his hands softly together, and for the moment seemed incapable of speech.

She had finished the refreshments, thrusting aside plate and glass, and her sparkling hand, which she had ungloved, rested upon his arm, as if unconsciously.

"You will retain my ring?"

"Retain it? Upon my finger never, against my heart forever! Madame, you are peerless! Gladys!" in a hushed, apostrophizing tone.

"What a name!"

"Ah, you heard my husband address me by my Christian name. I remember now."

The count ground his teeth, his hands clinching convulsively.

"What is it, dear friend?" The jeweled hand somehow came to rest against one of his. "Is it that you do not like to think of me having a husband?"

"Ah, signorina! the thought of another possessing you—"

He seized her hand, and pressed it to his lips.

"Stop, Signor Count! this—this is—"

"Wrong, presumptuous, distasteful to you?"

"Not at all, but—imprudent."

"There is yet another!" he murmured, with a jealous glare.

"To whom can you refer?"

Before he could reply there was an approaching step, he quickly released her hand, and that other was before them.

#### CHAPTER IX. MASKS AND FACES.

"WHAT, Leslie! wearying of Miss St. John and the dance so soon?" said Mrs. Hardy, sweetly.

The intruder with difficulty concealed a jealous scowl.

"But my fair step-mother knows how to console herself, at all events, he sneered, with a short bow of recognition for her companion.

"Of course, my dear boy; for could I help feeling a trifle faint after the affair in yonder?" With a slight shudder at the tragic nook, as she took the count's arm and arose.

This was said in a subtly propitiating tone, accompanied by a melting glance, that completed the detective's secret disgust for her indiscriminate falseness, and still further exculpated him in his own eyes from the otherwise unenviable double-part he was playing, to her deception and ultimate exposure.

Even this fascinated youth, her own step-son, was not to be permitted an escape from her unholy spell!

Slightly mollified, Leslie accompanied their return to the ball-room.

"I did not suspect your pretended evanishment from our shores as a mere ruse, count," he remarked, "until my sister asked me at the last moment to send you an invitation."

"Ah, signor," was the reply, "how fortunate for me, then, that street-recognition of hers on the same day! However, I am to remain *incognito* for the present—political and other reasons."

"Still, your unmasking with the rest to-night could hardly tend to the preservation of an *incognito*."

"*Corpo di Bacchio*, no! but could I resist the temptation of a *bal-masque*, and such a one as this?" And the *pseudo* count struck his forehead with so comically foreign an air that the young man with difficulty repressed a smile.

Instantly his scowl returned, however, for the edge of a whirling waltz had by this time been reached while Gladys and the count had slipped away into its vortex, with scarcely a nod of parting.

Following them with his moody eyes, Leslie leaned against the wall, a prey to gloomy reflections, which even a gay recognition from Avice and Herbert St. John as they undulated past failed to dissipate.

"What beastly witch's glamour is come over me for the past year?" he wearily cogitated. "Honor and common decency should warn me back, and time was when a single smile or bright glance from Mary St. John was all of heavenly promise I desired. But now"—he passed his hand across his forehead with an inward groan—"God in heaven! it seems as if I would go through fire or contest the seas for a single side-long, blood-rousing look from my own father's beautiful young wife!"

A beautiful young lady, who had just slipped breathlessly from out the rhythmic whirl, and dismissed her partner therein, tapped him lightly with her fan.

"What! you as a wall-flower, and in such a scene?" she exclaimed with a gayety that was a little forced.

A half-guilty color came into the young man's face, for it was Miss St. John herself.

"Why, Mary, I was just thinking of you!" He blushed to think in what connection. "Are you too tired to finish the waltz with me?"

"Tired of the dance, and while the music throbs? Have you forgotten me of old?" And then she was off with him in the seductive swim, with a renewed color in her fair face, for, little as he may have deserved it, Mary St. John's heart had long since been secretly given away to his unworthy keeping.

"Am I to suppose that Leslie is that 'other' you jealously alluded to, Signor Count?" Gladys had whispered to her partner.

"*Maldetto!* what other could I mean?" was the reply.

Gladys gave her low, musical laugh, her eyes flashing into his as they slowly revolved in time with music's voluptuous swell.

"Poor Leslie!" she murmured; "he is so hopelessly my slave, though I shall take care he is kept within proper bounds. But you shall have no cause to complain, Montalvo!"

The count emitted a half-amorous, half-despairing little groan.

"How am I to know that there are not yet others?" he asked.

Again she laughed, this time in keeping with the coquettishness of her ineffaceable half-smile.

"You are not to know anything about it," she exclaimed, with beautiful effrontery. "You are simply and blindly to—rejoice in what the gods may send in your own case."

Grippon's sense of disgust and hatred for the woman's recklessness almost overcame his diplomacy.

"And your husband?" he burst out; "what of him?"

"What, my doating lord, my money-maker, my purse-holder? Ah, count, you do not know me," with a light snap of her fingers. "I have him secure—manacled and chained beyond wisdom and beyond escape!"

A sense of suffocation, as if the perfume of her beauteous presence were a stifling air, came over the disguised detective.

"The music is in its last agonies," he murmured, "and perhaps I shall not see you again to-night. A prior engagement."

"But you will communicate with me, and soon, soon? Promise me that, count!"

"Yes, yes! what think you I am made of?"

"But swear it!"

The dance was at its last flurry.

"Gladys Hardy, I swear that henceforth you shall know enough and more than enough of me, until you fairly tremble and grow faint at the thought of my continued attentions!"

With this whispered and rather enigmatical assurance, he landed her with a parting bow in the midst of her awaiting satellites, and was gone—not, however, without catching a glance of encouraging significance from demure Eleanor Williams, *alias* Boston Nell.

"One moment, count!" appealed a low voice, as he was slipping away through the crowd.

It was from Avice Hardy, who had just sunk into a seat, after dismissing her lover-partner for the nonce.

"I must speak with you alone," she whispered, with ill-concealed agitation, as he gave her his arm. "The garden ought to be deserted now, and I doubt if the night-air is over chill."

He quickly procured her a wrap, and they managed to pass unperceived into the garden, which fulfilled her prediction of being both deserted, with not too chill an air, and, still better, with more than half the gay interspersing lanterns burned out, which made the seclusion yet more desirable.

"It must be our parting interview for the night, Miss Hardy," said the detective, with the deepest respect, "but I am glad you sought it. We are in the swim, you and I, with our affair."

"It encourages me to know it. And your half-anticipated sensation was on hand. Ah, that man's strange death!"

"A tragedy, truly, and yet but an episode in the comedy of Diamond cut Diamond that is under way."

"What do you mean?"

"That the seeming tramp's strange death is the black pivot upon which our grand *denouement*—the exposure and humiliation of our adventuress—must ultimately turn."

"You cannot be more explicit?"

"Not now."

"But those terrible dying words! They were undoubtedly accusatory, and of her."

"Undoubtedly."

"The poor man could have been no stranger to her."

"By no means," with an unwillingness to continue the subject, though Avice's curiosity was too fevered to give heed.

"Tell me, at least—was there poison? And if so, was it self-administered, think you, or—"

She paused with painful inquisitiveness.

"That I have already taken measures to find out. Now, no more on this point, I beg of you, Miss Hardy."

She reluctantly acquiesced.

"After all," she said, "that is not what I particularly wished to see you about."

"What then?"

"A new terror—for me!"

"Explain."

"Mr. St. John has to-night received pretty broad hints from my mother that her footman, Richards, is not what he seems—is, in fact, a man far above his menial position. Then Richards himself—"

"Go on. I begin to guess my lady's side-plot."

"Well, a short time ago Richards himself—"

who of course had been relegated to his proper place after the unmasking—met me in one of the second floor passages, and—and—"

She was blushing indignantly and with tears in her eyes, at this second pause.

"You can trust me. Go on."

"And ventured not only on a familiar remark, but associated it with a bold look of—of positive admiration!"

And Avice almost broke down completely at the humiliating recollection.

#### CHAPTER X.

##### THE POISONED CHAMPAGNE.

A DARK look, characteristic even through the perfection of his impersonating make-up, had come into the detective's face.

"Rash play, rash play, my lady!" he commented, more to himself than aloud. "Well, your action in the matter, miss?—though of course I can imagine what it was."

"Doubtless," continued Avice, who had recovered her composure. "I reproved the fellow sharply, though rather by my manner than my speech. To my amazement, he underwent no confusion. Miss Hardy, you are making a mistake," said he, quite composedly. "I am not the menial I seem, as Mrs. Hardy can inform you. Can you imagine a gentleman—a gentleman of lofty lineage and good fortune—accepting such a position as I hold in this house for love—out of overwhelmingly passionate if heretofore unavowed adoration—and the object of that love and adoration yourself alone? And before I could recover from the semi stupor of my indignant amazement he was gone."

Her hands clinched, and her eyes were fairly blazing now.

The detective's face, however, was once more serene.

"Bad play for her ladyship!" said he. "In fact I should scarcely have thought her capable of such a stupidity. Well, what do you think of it all, Miss Hardy?"

"That is what I want to know from you."

"Still, you must have pieced these surprises together in your own mind?"

"Perhaps so, though not very distinctly."

"What have you thought?"

"That Gladys Hardy seeks to make me, ultimately, the object of this man's open attentions, and in that way to get me more helplessly at her mercy."

"Right. In the mean time, simply be constantly on your guard, and don't forget to keep me thoroughly informed of what may chance."

"Of course I shall do that, sir. Then you think I have no real cause for fresh uneasiness?"

"Not at present. Watch them incessantly, and, if necessary, take the costume-fitter unhesitatingly into your confidence."

"What, that girl?"

"You have my assurance that she will be a valuable ally. Let us go in now; you may be looked for."

They had entered the garden by a little portico at the side of the conservatory annexes and were now at the still half-open glass door by which the mysterious tramp must have surreptitiously entered the glass-house, only to meet his mysterious death.

Avice remembered this and drew back, with an involuntary shudder, as her companion led the way thither.

"This is unworthy of you," he whispered. "Come; we can doubtless best escape observation by returning this way."

She mastered her reluctance and followed him noiselessly into the place, almost stepping, in fact, across the spot on which the tatterdemalion had fallen dead.

The conservatory was less brilliantly lighted than it had been. Indeed, as they stepped out of the tragic nook it was through a long and partly lighted passage between the tiers of flowers and plants that they could catch glimpses of the glowing and animated ball-room far beyond, where the dancers were circling and flashing past the open communicating portals.

They advanced but a few paces, and then came to an abrupt pause, while Avice instinctively clutched her companion's arm.

In a nook a little off the main passage—the same indeed that had been occupied by Gladys Hardy and the pretended count—a loving interview was in progress before their eyes.

The lover was silently kneeling at his adored one's feet, with his arms outstretched to enfold her waist, and she, bending over him in response, was pushing back the hair from his forehead with her two jeweled hands, while gazing earnestly into his uplifted eyes, and murmuring something that could not be overheard.

The woman was Gladys, the man Leslie Hardy—there was no mistaking their identity, though it was just made certain in the dim light.

Silently indignant, though altogether for Avice's chaste sake and the shock to her modesty, the detective turned away from the shameful spectacle, but his young companion had already disappeared.

She was waiting for him, however, outside the little door, shame-stricken and wrathful.



"Quick, to my father at once!" she exclaimed, hoarsely. "What need to plot, to counterplot and to wait? Let his eyes be opened at this instant, and the despicable witch's game is up forthwith. Quick, or the opportunity is lost!"

Gripon shook his head.

"What!" she went on; "would it be premature?"

"Decidedly so, to say nothing of the public scandal that would be risked. The sorceress must be more indubitably, more hopelessly within the toils than now."

She bowed submissively, but with evident reluctance.

"You shall see or hear from me to-morrow," he whispered, encouragingly, as they separated at the little portico.

The detective did not again mingle with the festivities, which still gave no signs of diminishing, but hurried away to the cloak-room.

How Boston Nell had managed it he did not stop to consider, but when his overcoat was handed to him by the attendant, it was in a round compact bundle, which proved, upon secret examination, to contain the tell-tale champagne bottle, even neatly stoppered, and with indications of still retaining some of its contents.

It was now three in the morning, and there was a crush of waiting coaches, public and private, before the house, for some of the guests were taking their departure.

Without waiting for the cab that had brought him upon the scene, Gripon, hugging the precious bottle under his coat, turned the corner as unobtrusively as might be, and hurried eastward along the dark and silent street, with the nearest Third Avenue Elevated Railroad Station as his objective point.

At the bridge-crossing of the Fourth Avenue Railroad cut a powerful masked figure started up before him so suddenly as to seem to spring out of the very ground at his feet, and a cocked revolver was presented to his breast.

"That bottle or your life!" was the attendant demand, in a hoarse voice, evidently also disguised.

At the same instant the detective, who had instinctively shifted slightly to one side, reeled under a sand-bag blow from behind, that, fortunately, just missed the back of his skull, else it would have been all up with him.

But it was evident that the ruffians did not know their man, or had estimated him for the dandified foreign gentleman that he appeared.

In another instant he had launched out with a kick behind, that found its mark and sent some one down in a cursing heap, while a consequent butting movement forward simultaneously dashed aside the leveled firearm, and brought his head in violent contact with the visible ruffian's throat, causing him to go staggering back with a kindred explosion of profanity.

But, this was the extent of Old Grip's defensive action for the nonce.

The butting blow had, unfortunately, driven his plug-hat clean down over his eyes and ears almost to his shoulders.

Before he could rid himself of the incumbrance, the scoundrels had recovered and darted upon him, too much blinded with rage perhaps to think of the chief object of their assault.

He was seized and hurled over the rail of the bridge at the same instant that a steam-whistle announced the near-at-hand rush of an Express train through the cut.

Almost giving himself up for lost, Gripon had, nevertheless, torn away the hat and kept his clutch on the precious bottle under his coat in the descent, but he had turned a complete somersault, and landed squarely on his feet in the center of the west track!

The train, coming from the north, was almost upon the disguised detective, with its flaming headlight seemingly as big as a house.

A low, startled exclamation had greeted his fall, and just as he reeled out of harm's way, its utterer—doubtless one of the track-walkers, lantern in hand, and terribly frightened—sprung away from his vicinity, directly out in the path of the coming engine!

All was over in an instant.

The man had sprung to his death, the monster of the headlight swept on with a sort of victorious guffaw, and yet another innocent man had been swallowed by the doom designed for Old Grip!

The latter had instinctively shrunk back under the bridge, while hugging the wall of the cut as closely as might be, the still lighted lantern of the luckless track-walker having rolled almost to his feet.

"He's done for, bottle and all, thank the Lord!" muttered a voice from above. "Let us be going."

"No hurry now," answered a second voice. "How did you know that this furrin chap had secured the bottle, what the fine lady was so wild over the loss of?"

"Saw him smuggling it out of the cloak-room. Her orders were slick enough. 'Get that bottle back or kill the man found making off with it.' Those were her words; and I was secretly on the watch in the cloak-room from that time out."

"Still, wasn't this the Eytalian chap she was so sweet on—the fellow dressed like the devil, you know, and who danced so well?"

"What of that? Orders are orders, and my lady's are obeyed. What could the blamed fool want with stealing the bottle, anyway, unless he was some enemy of hers in disguise? But both are smashed together now, and there's not a poisoned drop remaining to whisper as to the cause of the tramp's death in the conservatory. Come."

"Poison, eh?"

"Shut up! it's nothing to you. Come along, I say! Pah! I can almost smell the blood of the poor devil down there in the cut. In what a jiffy the engine dashed him to pieces before our very eyes!"

Then came the sound of retreating steps, which soon died away along the stillness of the streets.

The conversation had explained itself.

Old Grip seized the fallen lantern and managed to climb up out of the cut after threading its course for a block or two.

Then it was not long before he reached his home, and the repose of which he by this time greatly felt the need.

At noon of the following day he submitted the wine, of which there was less than a gill remaining in the bottle, to the analysis of a chemist friend.

The latter quickly decided that the wine was strongly impregnated with strychnine and some companion poison yet more powerful and deadly.

Leaving the bottle and its contents in the custody of his friend, without vouchsafing any explanation, though enjoining him to secrecy, Gripon (who was now in his own proper character) hurried away to attend the inquest that he had ascertained was to be held on the body of the tramp that afternoon.

The inquest, however, was over by the time he reached the place where it had been held, and the body had been removed to the morgue.

It had not been identified, and the hurried verdict had been simply that death had resulted from exposure and unwonted alcoholic excess at a time when the system was enfeebled and run down to the last degree.

Nothing had been said of suicide or poisoning.

It was such a coroner's finding as might suit an indifferent public well enough, but it did not satisfy Old Grip.

## CHAPTER XI.

### OLD GRIP IN HIS LAIR.

THE coroner himself was a good-natured but unscrupulous politician well known to the detective, and the latter lost no time in seeking a private interview with him.

"Confess that you rather rushed this inquest through, my boy," said Old Grip, with a significant look.

A lazy nod was the response, accompanied by the words:

"What of it? A miserable unknown tramp!"

"But one who chanced to die among upper-crust company, and under queer circumstances."

"Y-e-es. No denying that."

"What witnesses were summoned, Jake?"

"Only a couple of the servants. A chap named Richards, and the family coachman, whose name I have already forgotten."

"Yet there were many other witnesses of the man's death—Mr. and Mrs. Hardy themselves, among others."

"The deuce! do you suppose I would annoy people of that stamp?"

"Perhaps not—when they manifest a desire to come down handsomely."

The coroner laughed good-naturedly.

"Tut, tut, Gripon! what of it? Between you and me it's all right; coroners must live as well as others."

"Oh, I'm not finding fault, Jake. Let that go. But, didn't you suspect poison in the case?"

"Alcoholism, of course."

"No; I mean poison having been mixed with the wine before the tramp drank it—say, as most likely, with suicidal intent?"

"Frankly, then, old fellow, yes."

"But you ordered no *post-mortem* examination."

"Certainly not."

"Why?—whatever you say shall be in confidence."

"Don't I know that we are old friends, Ned Gripon? Well, of course I was slugged nicely—a real fat stake, you know—to rush the examination through."

"I'm not finding fault with you there, either. Politics is politics. But, let me ask you this: Did you suspect anything else but suicide?"

"Good Lord, no!"

"Let me enlighten you, then, my boy. It was no case of suicide. That man was murdered!"

"By Jupiter!"

"Yes; murdered by poison, and, if pushed to the wall, I can prove it."

"You astonish me, Ned! Were you at the Hardy ball?"

"Yes; in disguise."

"Who could have poisoned the fellow in such a place?"

"No matter. I can prove that he did not steal the wine, as doubtless your witnesses have asserted, but that it was given to him already poisoned."

"Good God! why, Mrs. Hardy was the only person who saw the fellow alone just prior to his death."

"Yes; but pass that for the moment. If I should prove what I have asserted, it would scarcely enhance your reputation for professional capacity and square dealing."

"It would simply ruin me, Ned; you ought to know that."

"Of course, I've no intention of doing that with an old school-fellow," the detective went on. "But you ought to do something for me in return."

"Just state your wish, my boy."

"There must have been something or other found on the dead body by which it could be identified as something more than absolutely nameless."

"You're right; there was."

"What was it?"

"An old wallet, or pocketbook, containing some few papers, and stamped with the owner's name."

"Well?"

"That was all; I was paid well to destroy the evidence, and make no mention of it to my jury."

"But did you destroy it?"

"No."

"Jake, I must have that pocketbook and its contents."

"Is it a particular game of yours, Ned, that requires you to hold these things some day as a winning hand?"

"It is, Jake—a deep, a vital game."

"My boy, the evidence shall be yours."

And Old Grip went away from the interview with the wallet in his possession.

Upon examination the wallet was found to be very old and worn, but with the owner's name, "Joseph Farley," still distinctly legible in the leather.

The contents were several documents, creased and yellowed, but whose subject matter caused the detective's eyes to glisten with satisfaction as he carefully returned them to their receptacle.

This was after he had reached the privacy of his own down-town office. He was then about to deposit the old pocketbook in one of his secret drawers, but changed his mind after a moment's reflection and secured it in a breast-pocket attached to his undershirt.

"That is safest," he muttered. "The great building here might burn up some day during my absence, and then this precious key to my lady's undoing would disappear in smoke and flame. No, no; poor Joe Farley's body will have to pass, unrecognized, from the Morgue to the crowded charnel-pits of Potter's Field, perhaps, but only with my life shall this secret of his wrongs and death pass out of my keeping, save when the clock of fate sounds the hour of that arch-sorceress's doom, together with that of her remorseless and unquestioning satellites!"

But before changing his intention with regard to the disposition of the wallet he had made a pretense of putting it away in a certain drawer of his desk, after which he had flitted behind a screen and secured it as has been mentioned.

Returning to his desk by the window, he touched the button of a silver call-bell at his elbow.

A small, cunningly-concealed door in the rear wall of the long, narrow office instantly opened to admit the entrance from a small inner room of a slender lad of fourteen or fifteen, in a neat-fitting mouse-colored suit and with an impish, but very intelligent face.

The little fellow noiselessly approached the desk and waited expectantly with the solemnity of a young owl.

"Anything of importance during my absence, Cheese it?"

"No, sir."

"No visitor?"

"Nary a chump."

"You saw me enter a few minutes ago?"

"Is my eagle-eye ever absent from the peephole, Mr. Gripon?" with an aggrieved look that added to his comical air of superhuman solemnity; "that is, when I'm not doin' my stint of sleep, or away on a diplomatic racket?"

"Well, has any one been at my door since I last entered?"

"Betcherlife."

"Who?"

"The black-muzzled, bush-whiskered galoot as was concerned in the sign-board tr-r-rag-edy."

"Ah! what doing?"

"Watchin' yer through the keyhole for all he was worth."

"For how long?"

"Till you hid away something in one of them drawers."

"Oho! and then?"



"Then he slid away, lookin' as happy as a snake in skin-sheddin' time."

"Good!"

And Grippon chuckled softly to himself.

He then wrote as follows on a narrow slip of paper:

"Can't prudently confer by daylight to-day, though there is much to disclose. Try to manage an interview for this evening at the house of some friend in whom you can trust. Burn this instantly (had you *burned*, instead of tearing into bits and scattering, my last written communication, the dry-goods-store tragedy might have been averted) and send verbal answer by bearer. E. G."

"Who for?" asked Cheese-it, as the slip was placed in his hands.

"For my young lady visitor of day before yesterday, as you did once before."

"All right, guv'ner."

"Wait! It must be placed in her own hands, unperceived by any one else, and you are to wait for a verbal answer. I shall await your return here. How shall you manage it?"

The boy scratched his head, gave a lightning-like grin, and forthwith disappeared into his secret den.

He speedily reappeared in his District Messenger uniform, and bearing under his arm a neatly-folded fictitious bundle, whose wrapper he displayed as bearing the trade-stamp of a fashionable up-town glove and hosiery establishment.

"How's that for high, boss?" with another fleeting grin from somewhere out of his preternatural solemnity.

"That will do. Take the Elevated, and waste not a moment."

Immediately following upon the lad's arrow-like departure, the detective stood the office-door wide open, as a precaution against further eavesdropping.

Then, with clever dispatch, he cleared his desk drawers and compartments of all papers of value, and transferred them to the interior of a small fire-proof safe, solidly set in the masonry of the opposite wall, the thick, heavy door of which, so cunningly was it contrived, would not have been suspected to exist there by the most searching of unfamiliar eyes, when it was once closed and fastened by the ingenious spring lock, of which he alone possessed the controlling secret.

Having effected the transfer, without the possibility of being observed, he drew from the safe an old pocketbook, somewhat similar in size and appearance with the one he had previously concealed upon his person.

This he filled with some selected documents, stained and creased something like those in the dead man's wallet, and then thrust it away in the identical drawer in which he had pretended to put its prototype before providing it with a better hiding-place.

Then, having closed the secret safe and arranged the desk in its accustomed order, he shut the door once more, seated himself leisurely, and, cocking up his feet in true American fashion, calmly proceeded to look over the newspapers against his messenger's return.

It was now the middle of the afternoon.

While engaged in the manner described there came a knock on the door, accompanied as he thought by the rustle of a woman's dress.

Had Avice Hardy forestalled his desire for an interview by coming upon a second visit?

Eagerly opening the door, he retained his self-control only by a supreme effort upon being unexpectedly confronted by—Gladys Hardy!

He betrayed nothing of his astonishment, however, as he conducted her to a seat, and, having closed the door, respectfully awaited her convenience.

What fresh and bold move was *La Belle Dame du Souris Glacé* up to now? he wonderingly asked himself, but with the face of a sphinx and every faculty of his brain alert and active.

"You, I presume, are the famous detective, Old Grip?" she asked, sweetly, after a swift inspection of his features and his attitude.

The detective bowed.

"Have you and I ever met in the past, sir? Excuse me for not proceeding with my business at once; but I was just now vaguely impressed with the idea that your face might have once been known to me."

The detective merely shook his head with a perplexed look, while bowing yet again as if deprecating his inability to respond to her impression.

"Of course, I must have been mistaken, then," and Gladys, who was magnificently attired, drew her handkerchief—a flake-like wonder of lace and cambric—from her reticule. "Now, sir, to my business. I am in an agony of suspense and wish you to help me out of it."

She really did look the prey to some ill-concealed anxiety, and just touched the handkerchief to her eyelids.

"Will madam be so good as to state her case?" and Grippon ventured to seat himself before her in an expectant attitude.

"Certainly—that is, if I can find the fortitude to do so." She handed him her card, which he glanced at with a slight elevation of the eyebrows. "In the first place, I have your assurance of respecting my confidences?"

"Undoubtedly, madam. A lady of your dis-

tinguished social position would hardly come here without a previous assurance of that?"

"Perhaps not. Well," after a slight hesitation, "I shall speak to you without reserve."

## CHAPTER XII.

### OLD GRIP IS MYSTIFIED.

"PRAY, do so, madam," urged the detective, with professional earnestness. "It is my business to assist the distressed, and to unravel mysteries."

Gladys's agitation increased, and, above all, it seemed wholly unassumed, but she went straight to the point.

"I have reason to know that a friend of mine in whom I was deeply interested, a foreign gentleman of title and fortune, a certain Count Montalvo, was assaulted, perhaps fatally—God grant that that 'perhaps' may be justified by your researches—while returning home from a masked ball at my house at an early hour this morning."

Then she went on to describe the tragic affair of the Fourth Avenue Railroad bridge as circumstantially as if she had witnessed its every detail from the ruffianly point of observation.

"All these particulars," she explained, "I received from a cowardly man servant in my service, who chanced to witness the dastardly attack upon my friend, and his apparent destruction, but was too terrified to go to his assistance."

"And now," said the detective, "you would hope—what?"

Gladys clasped her hands, her face seeming to light up with a wild, flickering hope.

"That there was some mistake," she exclaimed—"that my servant's observation was at fault, that some other man met the terrible death designed for my friend, Count Montalvo, even to the delusion of his ruffianly assailants themselves!"

"How could that have been?" asked Old Grip, after a pause.

"I don't know—I can't imagine—but oh, God!" with passionate eagerness, "was it not possible, think you? Might it not have been?"

"A bare possibility, yes; though to see an actual occurrence is generally to believe in it."

She caught at even this, and drew a long breath of positive relief.

"Prove to me the truth, that there was or was not an illusion, that my friend found or escaped that horrible death! It is this that I demand of you."

"Easily enough done, I should say. The tragedy occurred too late for mention in the morning newspapers, it is true; but inquiry at the railroad offices might have relieved your suspense ere this."

"I have made the inquiry there?"

"With what result?"

"A man was mangled to death in the cut at the hour alluded to; but such of his remains as have been collected were of too—too fragmentary a nature to be certainly identified." Her face had grown livid. "True, they are supposed to be those of a lineman, one of the track-walkers, since then unaccountably missing. But nothing is sure, nothing beyond doubt; there is still the possibility of—of the assassins having succeeded only too well in their infernal work!"

And she momentarily buried her face in her hands.

"Pardon me, madam, but this seems to me scarcely credible. The lineman, if it was he who met the fate designed for your friend—enough of his remains would surely have been recovered to establish that fact beyond a doubt. Some rags or buttons of his uniform, for instance."

She shook her head hopelessly.

"No, no; there remains the agonizing doubt. The missing workman is known to have gone on duty without donning his uniform, by reason of being at a private entertainment up to the last moment of his liberty; and the body"—a fresh shudder—"was mangled utterly beyond recognition."

"Ah! so that it might be that of the poor gentleman, after all?"

"Yes; but God forbid!"

"Inquiry might then have been made at the count's residence?"

"Ah, do you imagine I would not have done so at once! But his present residence is unknown, as he was desirous of being somewhat *incognito* of late. And nothing is known of him at the Hotel Brunswick, where he formerly lived."

"So?"

And the detective knitted his brows.

"Oh, sir! it is to you that I come as a last resort. Do you think you can help me to hope on?"

"I can at least find out for you whether or not it was your friend, Count Montalvo, who met his death in the railroad-cut."

"That is it! that is it!"

"The ruffianly attack upon the gentleman is at least established beyond peradventure, it would seem."

"Yes; no doubt of that."

"The motive could scarcely have been robbery, it would seem?"

"Hardly. According to my witness, there was no such attempt, but only to hurl him to his death. It is known that Count Montalvo was in bad odor with some of the foreign secret societies here."

"Revenge would then have been the motive. But might not his death have been desired in some other connection?"

"Who can say? True, there was a strange occurrence at my *bal masque* an hour or so before his departure. An unknown ruffian was found dying, doubtless from self-administered poison, in one of the conservatory nooks. I have unaccountably thought of connecting the two incidents in some way, but with very little reason, I suppose."

"But in what way, if you please? It is indispensable that I should be fully informed, madam."

She gave the details of the tragedy in the conservatory.

"Well, Mrs. Hardy," said the detective, who had seemed to listen with absorbing attention, "I shall undertake your affair for you, if you wish."

"Oh, thank you, sir! But, what is your general opinion?"

"I think the count is still alive."

Her beautiful face lighted up with a joy that seemed impossible to be other than heartfelt.

"Bless you, bless you for those words."

"It is only my opinion; remember that. However, I engage to set your doubts at rest, one way or the other, within—forty-eight hours, we will say, which will give me ample margin. Within that time Count Montalvo shall pay his respects to you in person, or—it will be beyond his power to do so."

She looked positively radiant as she rose to go.

"Let me pay you for your services in advance, Mr. Grippon." She produced a check-book as she spoke. "How much will it be?"

"Five hundred dollars," he replied, looking at her steadily.

She filled a check for the amount as unconcernedly as if it had been for as many cents instead of dollars, cordially shook hands with him, and hurried away.

Ned Grippon, with a sort of dazed feeling to which his clear mind was little accustomed, watched her from his window until she had stepped into her carriage, and been driven away, noting casually that the footman, Richards, was not in his wonted seat beside the coachman on the box.

Then his fist came down on the desk with a resounding whack.

"Well," was all he could say, "I'll be everlastingly roasted if that woman doesn't beat me—at least for the present!"

He was interrupted from further consideration of the enigma by the return of Cheese-it with an answer to his message.

"Well, boy?"

"Miss Hardy will be at the house of her friend, Miss St. John, till eleven o'clock to-night."

"Where is that?"

"No. —, One Hundred and Fifty-second street, west."

"Good! You had no difficulty, then, in obtaining access to the young lady without being observed?"

"Boss," and the little fellow struck his breast with dramatic solemnity, "there was *lions* in my path. But I mastered 'em, and them as I didn't master I euchered."

"Good boy! Your fidelity shall be remembered on next pay-day, Cheese-it. In the mean time, remain at your post till you see me again, which shall be before eight o'clock this evening, the Lord willing and the devil not objecting."

With that, the detective hastened away, for much was to be accomplished.

He first visited Boston Nell's residence, of which she had given him the address, and was fortunate enough to find her awaiting him impatiently there.

"Here," said he, placing in her hands some letters with which he had come provided, "are some references that ought to place you on a solid footing in Mrs. Hardy's employ without further delay."

"I am glad you're come with them, for she will be expecting my return. Her trunk was already packed in readiness for a permanent change of quarters. Are these references genuine, Mr. Grippon?"

"Perfectly so, and from first-class society ladies. That they refer to a young woman named Wilson, instead of Williams, who is now, unbeknown to the writers, on her way back to her native England, is a little discrepancy that you will have to use your own wits in disposing of."

"A small matter, that," assured Eleanor, with her confident smile. "Wilson is near enough to Williams when it comes to a poor workwoman's name."

"Nothing crooked in there, I hope?" and he touched the trunk with his foot.

"Not a shred or a stitch, on my word, Grip! I haven't retained even so much as a pawn-ticket, and feel stronger than ever to do the right thing by you."



"That is the right talk, Nell. You have then money enough for your primary needs?"

"Yes."

"What new of my lady, since the ball?"

"Grip, you'll hardly believe me when I tell you."

"I'll try to."

"The woman is dead gone on you, as the Italian count, without a particle of doubt."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"She did not then suspect the genuineness of my impersonation?"

"Not for an instant."

"A genuine case, eh?"

"Yes."

"How about her mooning step-son, Leslie?"

"Pooh! she but amuses herself there."

"Rather dangerous amusement."

"The danger is its spice. But, really, she is bored inexpressibly by the young man, and only keeps him on, as against a possible future chance."

"What chance?"

"Perhaps the present husband's death. After the father, the son; and who would say her nay?"

"Ah, I understand. Well, to return to the count, what more?"

"She is beside herself. She fears that he has been murdered, and through the too-hasty zeal of her minions. By the way, something must have happened to you on your way home from the ball?"

"I should say so!" and he forthwith related the adventure.

"Ah, that is it! She had a terrible scene with Richards—who was your chief assailant—when informed by him of your supposed death."

"But, was she in earnest? That is what I want to be sure of."

"Rest easy. Her earnestness is as genuine as that of a tigress cheated of a prospective mate."

"But, how can she account for her Montalvo having gone off with that tell-tale bottle?"

"I don't believe she cares to ask herself. The agony of having lost him engrosses every other feeling."

Here the interview terminated.

#### CHAPTER XIII.

##### ONE OLD POCKETBOOK.

OLD GRIP's next visit was to Dr. Sanford, the chemist who had analyzed the contents of the fatal champagne bottle for him, and who was likewise a practicing physician and surgeon of prominence.

He was pleased to find the professor alone in the laboratory adjoining his office.

"Do you not, on occasion, obtain bodies from the public dead-house for dissection?" was the detective's first question.

"It is perhaps feasible now and then, my friend," was the guarded reply.

"You know you can afford to be perfectly frank with me, doctor."

"So be it, Mr. Grippon."

"You have a private class in practical anatomy now, I believe?"

"Yes; it meets this evening," said the other, with a wave of the hand toward an adjoining room, whose door was suggestively flanked by well-mounted human skeletons in glass cases.

"Are you in need of a fresh subject?"

"Yes!" with suppressed eagerness.

"There is one now lying at the morgue, which I can put you in the way of obtaining forthwith, under certain conditions—the keeper to receive the accustomed fee, of course."

Dr. Sanford was at once deeply interested. He rubbed his hands softly together, his eyes brightening behind his spectacles, as though in anticipation of some glorious if forbidden feast.

"Man or woman?"

"Man."

"A suicide?"

"That is a question, though poison wrought the death-work."

"What! the death you hinted of when you brought me that wine to analyze?"

"The same."

"You spoke of conditions."

"They are these: The corpse must first be photographed. You can manage that by night?"

"Easily; the electric light can perform wonders nowadays."

"Then a memorandum must be made of every distinguishing mark presented by the corpse, with the signatures of your students as witnesses."

"It shall be done. Why not?"

"Then the stomach shall be examined, and the cause of death attested, as before, in formal documentary form."

"It shall be done—as a matter of course. Anything more?"

"The remains are then yours for general dissecting purposes, on the sole remaining condition that what is left of them be decently confined, subject to removal and burial at my order."

"Thank you, my dear sir. It is more cere-

mony than we are usually called on to observe; but the conditions shall be rigidly complied with."

Old Grip wrote something on the back of one of his cards, and handed it to the professor, who was already impatient to take the first steps for obtaining the coveted "subject."

"That," declared the detective, "will enable you to treat with the morgue-keeper, without beating about the bush unnecessarily."

"Ah, I see; my credentials, so to speak. But a word more, in mercy to my curiosity, my dear fellow."

"As many as you please, doctor—within reason."

"Didn't the coroner order a *post-mortem*?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The detective smiled, and extended his hand, palm uppermost, with a significant twitching of the fingers.

"Oh!"

And, with a certain surprised but knowing look, the professor contented himself for the time being.

It was already nightfall when Old Grip quit- ted the physician's up-town office.

He then snatched a hasty meal at a restaurant and hurried down-town for a last visit to his business-quarters before seeking the appointment with Avicé Hardy.

As he turned into his office street from Broadway, after quitting the Elevated Road at the Rector street station, he overtook his small clerk, who was discussing an apple-tart, with a bundle, doubtless containing more tarts, under one arm, and a bottle of beer under the other.

"Hallo!" was the master's greeting. "Making a peripatetic supper, eh?"

Cheese-it stuffed the last segment of the tart in his mouth, carefully brushed some crumbs from his mouse-colored suit while holding on to his packages with an elbow grip at either side, and essayed to grin, though not with signal success.

"Yes, sir," he huskily responded. "I thort I'd take a bite or two, and then bunk in."

It was now about eight o'clock of a rather chill, raw evening, with the usual sense of loneliness settling down that is characteristic of this quarter of the city as night deepens.

"Anything turned up?"

"Not a pointer, boss."

"No more keyholing, even?"

"Not a peep; though I *did* think I caught a glimpse of that black-muzzled galoot on the sidewalk just before dusk."

Just here there was a shout of "Fire!" and a policeman darted past them to spring the alarm at the nearest alarm-box.

"It's our building!" exclaimed Old Grip, a moment later.

Followed by Cheese-it, he rushed toward the lofty building in which his office was located.

The janitor had just issued from the main entrance in a sort of bewildered panic; volumes of smoke were bursting out of many of the upper windows, and the lower hallway was also filled with eddying smoke.

"It all happened like magic," faltered the man. "I smelt something burning, and before I could hurry up from the basement-floor the whole building was like a smoke-house."

Grippon did not reply, but dashed through the hall and up the stair-flights at the rear—the elevator not being available at that hour—with Cheese-it still at his heels.

The smoke was almost suffocating, but when they reached their own floor it slightly cleared and a bright, unflattering light could be seen issuing out of the detective's open office-door.

With a low, hoarse cry, something like the bull-dog's onset growl when he springs at the prowler's throat, the detective flew to the defense of his den.

Before he could reach the door, however, a dark, bushy-bearded man rushed out of it, triumphantly flourishing something like an old pocketbook over his head.

As the fugitive cleverly eluded the detective's attempt to seize him, Cheese-it's bottle of beer, thrown with unerring cleverness, struck and broke on the bridge of his nose, the contents deluging his face and neck.

He did not seem to mind it, however, but continued his flight.

Tearing open the door of the elevator shaft—the lift, fortunately for him, chancing to be at rest in the basement for the night—he sprang for and got a hold on the main cable.

Down this he disappeared with incredible swiftness, hand over hand, and with the pocketbook between his teeth, before his pursuers could more than comprehend his intention.

They retraced their steps to the front end of the hall, and, looking out of the window there, saw the fellow coolly lose himself in the rapidly gathering street-crowd, after managing in some way to issue from the shaft on the ground floor.

It was a queer sort of conflagration, after all, in which there was plenty of smoke, but with no flame discoverable as yet.

When the janitor, the policeman and two or three firemen put in an appearance up above, Grippon was seated in his best office-chair,

with the gas at full head as the burglar had left it.

He was philosophically contemplating his overturned and partly dismantled desk, whose drawers and compartments appeared to have been turned inside out; while his mouse-colored assistant was finishing his apple-tarts at leisure, and silently mourning over the loss of his beer.

The new-comers looked inquiringly at the detective.

The latter, by way of answer, pointed to his door, whose patent Yale lock seemed to have been blown to pieces, as if by a cunningly-inserted charge of powder, and then to his desk.

"Do you find that much of your property is missing?" inquired the policeman.

"Only an old pocketbook containing some papers of but little value," was the reply.

"But where is the fire?" demanded the fireman.

"My dear fellow, ask me something easy. It really seems to be a refutation of the old saying that where there's smoke there's fire."

It was at last found burning briskly enough, however, in a waste receptacle on the floor directly below, and was speedily extinguished, with but trifling damage having been effected.

The detective's office was soon set to rights, and while a new lock was being fitted to the door under the superintendence of Cheese-it (whose beer was not forgotten), Old Grip set out to keep his last appointment.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### THE S-SHAPED AIRY CURVE.

WAS this last appointment of that eventful day to be likewise crossed by some unlooked-for adventure?

It looked very like it. At all events, before the detective had even boarded the Elevated train, with the St. John residence in West 152d street as his destination, he experienced a vague sensation that he was being dogged.

It was an instinctive warning, the value of which had been verified on many a similar occasion, and he was instantly on the alert.

But this time there really seemed to be no sense whatever in the premonitory uneasiness.

Even after boarding the train, a careful scrutiny of his fellow-passengers in the car failed to reveal any but unfamiliar and innocent-looking faces.

It was a cool, starry, Indian summer night, in somewhat painful contrast with the delusive balminess of the preceding one of the masquerade.

As the upper end of Central Park was approached, where the West-side Elevated structure makes that grand, dizzily lofty, S-shaped curve, there was the usual wakening up of the passengers, which seems to spring from an instinctive feeling of insecurity and alarm, lest the train should chance to take a tumble at this particularly dangerous point.

To appearance at least, the road-bed is elevated considerably more than a hundred feet, on a columned frame-work that has a strangely spidery and inadequate look from below.

In the train above one seems to be literally traveling upon nothing.

A glance out at either side shows the house-roofs, of which there are but few in the immediate vicinity, at a startling depth below; the empty lots have the checker-board aspect such as is presented by a bird's-eye view from a balloon; while there is a wide sweep of vision that takes in more than half the upper part of Manhattan Island.

"Danger ahead! For God's sake, slow up!" suddenly screamed a voice from one of the platforms, just as the train was rounding the loftiest point of this notable curve on this occasion.

Instantly there was a species of panic, in which the lady-passengers were seen to grow white, while the majority of the men made a rush toward the forward platform, from which the alarm had proceeded.

No one was there, however, and the brakeman, justly indignant, declared it the work of some brutal practical joker, who had doubtless slipped into the next car forward, after witnessing the first effects of his unseemly jest.

Our detective, however, who never lost his head in any emergency, had quietly investigated by stepping out upon the rear platform, and it was from this point that a fierce shout for help rung out through the closed door as the tricked passengers were returning to their seats.

It was but natural that, having already been so heartlessly fooled, they should suspect the genuineness of the second alarm, and respond to it slowly and with some degree of reservation.

In the mean time, however, Old Grip was struggling for his life with three ruffians, who had unexpectedly precipitated themselves upon him the instant he had stepped out upon the platform.

In fact, when the guard and others at last tore open the door, there was merely a parting glimpse of a human form apparently disappearing in the abyss, and the three assailants were alone on the platform.



"The man must have been insane!" exclaimed one of the trio, with a bewildered and horrified appearance. "I did my best to hold the poor devil back."

"So did we all," cried another, in similar excitement, real or feigned. "But he fought like a madman, tore himself away, and jumped over!"

The third showed the disorder of his garments, which were likewise torn and ripped.

"I did my best, too," said he, "but came near being dragged over myself. Poor fellow! there was a wild, suicidal look in his eyes the moment I set eyes on him."

"How came that gate open?" demanded the guard. "Couldn't the three of you stand between the gentleman and that?"

"Bless you! he had it open before we could suspect his intentions," the first speaker took it upon himself to reply. "Perhaps you'd better try the experiment yourself of wrestling with a madman in such a ticklish place! My God! I'm all upset."

They hurried into the car, and thence along forward, as though completely unnerved.

The train had by this time swept around the curve, and was beginning to slow up for the next stopping-place, the elevation rapidly growing less as higher ground was reached.

The brakeman, together with several passengers, had remained on the platform, without a thought of detaining the trio, or of doubting their statement as to the facts in the horrible affair.

"I say!" at this juncture spoke out a calm voice from somewhere out over the side; "lend me a hand, will you? It's rather uncertain work for me out here."

They looked over the gate, to perceive a man clinging to the lowest notch of the iron lattice-work by the grip of a single finger.

With the utmost care and difficulty, they succeeded in rescuing him from his appalling position.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the astounded trainman; "how did you manage to catch on out there?"

"Three were a little too many for me," was the cool reply. "It was the best I could do, after being forced through the adjoining gate, and hurled over the edge by those murderous rascals. Now do you begin to 'catch on,' my friend?"

"Not by a hanged sight! Why didn't you holler out before, when we could have laid hands on the villains?"

"Don't know. Perhaps I had sort of gone off in a little private faint."

"Why, it's Old Grip, the detective!" exclaimed one of the bystanders. "They must have been all-fired fresh to suppose that they could murder him! It is well enough known that he ain't killable."

The speaker was a young bookkeeper with whom the detective had a nodding acquaintance.

"I lay no claim to a charmed life, my boy," said Grippon, quietly. "But I believe it is generally conceded that it takes a good deal of solid agony to down me."

In the mean time the brakeman had rushed forward, loudly sounding the alarm of the murderous attempt.

But it was too late. The head of the train had already begun to draw into the station, and by the time the alarm had spread itself through the foremost car the would-be assassins had managed to effect their disappearance.

The detective reached his destination without further molestation.

Miss St. John and her brother were with Avice when Old Grip presented himself to her in the cosy library-room of the St. John homestead; which was a comfortable, old-fashioned dwelling, once the family farm-house, and still surrounded by a goodly slice of its ancient extensive grounds.

The brother and sister were wealthy orphans, who still clung to the old place as a permanent residence, though Herbert was something of a club man and Mary went much into society.

Avice introduced the visitor to her friends, and then said:

"Mr. Grippon, naturally enough my friends here are somewhat aware of my business with you, for they are about the only intimates I have amid a large circle of acquaintance. And, besides being discreet, they are with me heart and soul in the contest that I have taken up against my step-mother and her plots."

The detective bowed, and, knowing perfectly what was coming, fell to secretly studying the brother and sister.

"I want to ask you," continued Avice, "whether they—they might not—"

She came to a confused pause.

"Be admitted into our confidence and counsels is probably what you wish to say, Miss Hardy," supplemented the detective, quietly.

"Yes, that is it," with a relieved air.

The detective was gravely silent, after which he said, with a smile:

"I see that Miss St. John is of the thoughtfully silent type of young ladies—a rare one; and I have seen Mr. St. John uncomplainingly take his gruel from a stronger and more ex-

perienced boxer at the New York Athletic Club—in fact, with a close-jawed hardihood worthy of admiration. No, Miss Avice, I shall offer no objection to the combination you propose. But—they may be called upon to do some work for the privilege."

"That is just what we want to do, Mr. Grippon," eagerly exclaimed Herbert St. John, greatly pleased at the detective's encomium.

"Indeed we do, sir," said Mary, earnestly. "We are interested in the fight almost as much as Avice herself. You will find us both discreet and active."

"I am so glad it is settled in this way!" said Avice, pressing her hands together. "I feel so lonely and lost-like, sir," with a grateful glance at the detective, "when you are not present with your wise counsel."

## CHAPTER XV.

### HARD NUTS TO CRACK.

"I SUPPOSE, Miss Hardy," said Grippon, "that you have not much news to give me as occurring since the ball—the interval has been so brief."

"Almost nothing," was the reply. "I have only seen my step-mother once since then. That was at our mid-day breakfast. However, there is this much new—she seemed so uneasy and preoccupied as to scarcely notice me."

"Cause enough for that, perhaps."

And then the detective related his own experiences, beginning with the adventure on the railroad-bridge, concluding with his narrow escape as last recorded, and omitting nothing of importance.

The breathless interest with which he was listened to can readily be imagined.

"Why, this is crowding a lifetime into a day!" exclaimed Herbert, while the young women could only wonder and clasp their hands in their laps. "It is almost equal to any day the Three Guardsmen ever spent with the dare-devil D'Artagnan at their head!"

"We have to deal with cold facts, though," said the detective. "And the puzzler of today's happenings to me is that visit of Mrs. Hardy's to my office."

"It is enigmatical," said St. John. "I don't see how to reconcile the contradictions of that move."

"I do," interposed Avice, while Miss St. John also failed to look particularly overpowered.

Old Grip looked at her inquiringly.

"What is Miss Hardy's elucidation?" he asked.

"Simply this: The woman is boldly enamored of the character of Count Montalvo, as represented by your make-up for that personality."

"And yet she penetrated my make-up as poor Mr. Vanderbuysen—instantly, and to that poor gentleman's destruction."

"True; but she did not penetrate your Montalvo make-up. It was far more faithful to the life than in the former case. Even my brother, who is personally acquainted with the real count, was wholly deceived by it."

"Still, the intuition of *La Belle Dame du Souris Glacé* is exceptionally acute."

"Granted."

"May she not, then, have penetrated this second characterization from the very first? And, in that case, would not her subsequent action be but part and parcel of a subtle and complicated scheme to lull me into fancied security, to circumvent and destroy me and my counterplots at leisure?"

"I have thought of that. Yes, in such a case she would be fully capable of the depth and cunning of such subsequent action. But she has not penetrated your last characterization. I feel sure of that."

"Your reasons, if you please."

"Since then I have had an opportunity of watching and studying her when she thought herself alone in the solitude of her private reflections."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and I tell you her anxiety over what she learned from Richards of the result of his self-authorized attack upon the count at the crossing of the railroad cut was not assumed, but real and poignant, as thus betrayed in her supposed seclusion."

"But he must also have told her of his incentive to that assault—of his countship's suspicious action in carrying off the dregs of the poisoned wine from the cloak-room."

"Gladys Hardy is a strange, no less than wicked and unscrupulous, woman. Engrossed in her new passion, and frenzied at fearing its being crossed, she would have paid no heed to that suspicious circumstance, or ascribed it to some passing eccentricity on the count's part. She might even risk her chances for something worse in that regard."

"What, for instance?"

"Why, she might even have suspected that he, the count, had suspected her of poisoning the man in the conservatory, and had carried off the wine to have it analyzed, in the hope of having her more securely in his power—at the mercy of his passion, so to speak. And, supposing her own passion as equally violent, she would be apt to accept such suspicion and design

upon his part as a flattering acknowledgment of her superlative fascinations. She would stop at nothing."

This was rather extraordinary talk, from the lips of a refined young lady, and in the presence of two gentlemen, one of them her lover.

Indeed, it called up a flush to Mary St. John's clear cheeks. But Avice's own face was pale while she spoke thus plainly upon such ugly matters; she spoke slowly and with forced composure, which showed with what brave determination she was forcing her argumentative faculty to the front, in heroic disregard of her maidenly reluctance to touch upon the subject at all; and both Herbert and Old Grip listened with a respectful gravity that was a sufficient concession to her moral courage in it all.

Grippon, however, shook his head, and it was easy to see that Mr. St. John agreed with him in failing to fall in with Miss Hardy's bold assumption.

"Your theory, Miss Avice," said the former, "is creditable to both your intelligence and your imagination. But I will explain to you presently why I can't agree with it as to the extent to which Gladys would permit her caprice for the supposed Montalvo to blind her judgment as her own security. However, granting the correctness of all you have advanced, why would she apply to me, of all other private detectives, as a means to assist her out of her suspenseful anxiety, if the latter were not more or less cunningly assumed?"

"And why not to you—to Old Grip, considering his paramount reputation in his profession?"

"Thank you, miss; but that isn't the point. She has marked me already as your agent, and consequently her enemy. In fact, she knows and fears me as such of old—of which I may tell you more at some other time. She deliberately ordered my death at the dry-goods store, and it was only by the interposition of a strange fatality that another suffered in my place and I escaped."

"True."

"She had even undertaken hostilities against me before you did me the honor to request my services in your behalf. The tragedy of the sign-board, where yet another innocent man met the bloody fate designed for myself, was a first proof of this. Her demoniac declaration of her undying hatred for me to you in the coach, when exulting over my supposed decapitation by her minion Richards, was a sufficient corroboration of the same thing."

"True, true!" and Avice placed her hand to her forehead as if to steady her slowly-confusing thoughts.

"So that, once again I ask," continued Old Grip, "why should she have applied to me, if not for some treacherous purpose of her own?"

But Avice was prepared to stand by her theory elaborately embroidered as it was, while a rag of it remained.

"I can see why she should," was her reply. "It was through her willingness to work two games at one and the same time."

"How so?"

"To make you think she was sincerely trying to conciliate you, and to relieve her anxiety as to Montalvo's fate, both at once."

"A queer double game for even her ladyship to attempt—to desire my destruction in my own person, and my salvation for her own sake in my fictitious character!"

"A very strange game. But as it is a proof of her own self-deception in part, shall you not wring your own opportunity out of the complication in which your clever duality has involved her?"

Grippon smiled.

"It will be my own fault if I do not," he declared quietly. "Miss Avice, I want to compliment you on your comprehensiveness. You would make a far abler female detective than the best of them that are now in the Custom House employ."

It is not often that a fashionable young lady is congratulated upon her brains by a brainy man who would disdain to flatter, and Avice did not attempt to hide her pleasure at such a compliment.

"You needn't blush, for Mr. Grippon gives you no more credit than you deserve, my dear," interposed Miss St. John, gayly. "At college you were easily head-and-shoulders above us all where anything like original thinking was concerned."

Herbert St. John laughed at them both.

"At all events," said he, "let us not risk degenerating into a mutual admiration coterie. Mr. Grippon, I hope you will let me share some of the fresh adventures that I feel sure are in store for you in this affair."

The last words were spoken with impressive earnestness.

"You shall do so," replied the detective, after a pause.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### AN ADVENTURE'S HISTORY.

"LET us see just how we stand at the present moment," said Avice Hardy. "Mr. Grippon, are we to understand that you are ready, when



the proper time arrives, to accuse Gladys Hardy of having murdered the unfortunate stranger who died in the conservatory?"

"My measures are almost, but not quite, complete to that end," replied Old Grip. "I have told you of the coroner's farcical inquest, and of my business interviews with Dr. Sanford, from which you all must have drawn the correct conclusions."

"Yes; the man will be proved to have been poisoned—you will have that much in reserve. What more is to be obtained before you strike?"

"This much: Proof that the man did not steal the wine, but that it was given to him, ready-poisoned and with murderous intent, by Gladys with her own hands; that there was a provoked motive on her part, in that she had received a threatening, we will say a blackmailing, letter from the same man, and had replied thereto, yesterday at noon; and, as a crowning motive for deadly, consuming animosity, on my lady's side, in that—"

He came to a suggestive pause, as if hesitating whether to trust them any further or not.

"What?" exclaimed his companions, almost in a breath. "Surely you will not but half trust us now? Speak!—A crowning motive for deadly, consuming animosity on the lady's side in that—what?"

The answering words came out one by one, slowly and heavily, like thunder-shower drops:

"In that that man was her husband!"

"Her husband?" was echoed by the trio.

"Just that."

"You can't mean," exclaimed Avie, "Sir Lionel Cholmondley—who had obtained a divorce from her, as my father only learned after his marriage to the woman?"

"Certainly not; since Sir Lionel is still living!"

"Some other—"

"Exactly; her first husband, one Joseph Farley, formerly a dissipated and ne'er-do-well young Georgian. How many, more or less, she may have had in the interim is not of any particular moment."

"And you can prove all this?"

"I expect to do so. When all the proofs are in my hands, then, and not before, will the last fearful hour of Gladys, *alias*, of old Gyp, Farley, the multifarious adventuress, have struck beyond recall!"

There ensued the sort of hush that is so often produced by a great and unlooked-for revelation, and which was broken at last by Miss Hardy.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in unaffected joy; "then the vile, bad woman's life with us is but a constant, a living lie, and she cannot be my father's wife, after all! Welcome the disgrace, the scandal that may fall upon our house by her temporary contamination of its hearth, if only this be proven in the end!"

The detective gravely bowed his head, while Miss St. John and her brother plainly manifested their sympathy for the sentiment as expressed.

"It will be proved," asserted the detective, confidently. "Have no doubts upon that score. In the mean time, I might as well give you such points in this woman's history as have long been known to me. You will then the better understand the sort of caution, energy and alertness that must be exerted to circumvent her plots and bring home to her the crimes that are scattered broadcast through her life."

A pin could have been heard to drop on the richly-carpeted floor during the pauses of the detective's voice, so intense and absorbing was the interest with which they hung upon his words as he proceeded.

"Twelve or thirteen years ago," the detective began his story, "I was in a small courthouse town in Georgia, not far from the Florida border line."

"It is 'among the pines,' a poor country, and the people for the most part a miserable lot—lazy blacks, not knowing as yet how to make the most of the freedom which still sits newly upon them, and still more good-for-nothing whites, what were called 'poor white trash' before the war."

"But the town was unusually excited over a trial that was going on, and I was soon attracted with the rest to the court-room."

"A young wife was on trial for an attempt to murder her husband and his father."

"With the utmost composure and without loss of color, she confronted her accusers in the sweltering, stifling hall. She was not more than sixteen, with the vivid bloom of girlhood, combined with womanhood's maturity."

"Public opinion was against her; and yet she was one of the most beautiful young women I had ever set eyes on."

"Her lips wore an everlasting one-sided smile—the result, as I afterward learned, of a slight but deep burn received in her infancy, but which had left no scar nor other effect than that haunting flicker of a smile. It even enhanced her extraordinary beauty, and gave an unintentional arch or coquettish look to her face."

It was the smile that has since become known on the two continents as *le souris glacé*, or the

frozen smile, for that young woman was none other than what Gladys Hardy has become.

"The cause for the girl's unpopularity was soon made known to me. She had belonged not only to the poorest of the poor white trash, but was of a disreputable family of English Gypsies that had made their nomadic haunt in those wild, sparsely-settled parts in the preceding generation."

"Her father had been hanged for horse-stealing. Her mother was an eldritch herb-gatherer and dispenser of love-charms, chiefly to negroes, in a miserable cabin in the swamps, where the girl had been born and bred. Her elder brother and sister were shiftless and somewhat desperate characters of the vilest reputation."

"Gladys, or Gyp, as she was mostly called, had told fortunes and enjoyed a reputation for cunning and chicanery, while being somewhat celebrated for her personal charms, when she had captivated young Joe Farley, the son and heir of a well-to-do and respectable small planter in the neighborhood."

"Well, in that lay the whole trouble. She had married into a respectable family—clandestinely, of course—which was not long in discovering that a fiery element of discordance had crept into its bosom."

"The union had not lasted a year, yet in that time she had wrought its partial degradation and ruin."

"The young husband, who was weak and infatuated, had been subtly encouraged in his gambling, drinking and other vicious propensities. His mother had died of a broken heart. The bride's unsavory relations had at times forced their way into the family-circle. The elder Farley, from being a worthy, God-fearing man had become of morose and violent temper, hard swearer, and most likely with very little charity for his beautiful daughter-in-law's shortcomings."

"It was no wonder that, in spite of her rare beauty, she was generally regarded as one of a serpent brood that had slimed a goodly nest. And yet there was no little hypocrisy in the obloquy that was heaped upon her; for I doubt if there was an unmarried man under fifty among her detractors that would not, if put to the test, have cheerfully succumbed to the fascination of the girl on occasion."

"She had wound up, it was charged, a particularly violent family quarrel, in which her own miserable crew was mixed up, by a deliberate attempt to murder both her husband and his father by an infusion of some deadly herb in their tea. They had narrowly escaped death, each after a lingering sickness, consequent upon the poisoned drink, of which fortunately but a small portion had been imbibed; and the fidelity of an old negro nurse had brought them out of their danger, besides first making the discovery which had led to the accusation being brought against the young wife."

"Young Farley, still not disenchanted, was but half-hearted in pressing the charge. But the father pushed it with a virulence and animosity worthy of two, and his well-wishers stood by him; while the girl-wife, apart from the silent influence of her personal attractions, was practically without a reputable friend in the world."

"However, the evidence against her was simply overwhelming."

"She was found guilty, with a strong recommendation to mercy, by reason of her youth, illiteracy and—beauty, though of course this last extenuation in her favor was not openly expressed."

"The court was no less susceptible than the jury. Gyp Farley was sentenced merely to three months' imprisonment, and ordered to quit the country at the expiration of her term."

#### CHAPTER XVII.

##### THE ADVENTURESS'S HISTORY CONCLUDED.

"My business kept me in that out-of-the-way corner of Georgia for a number of months."

"Soon after Gyp Farley's discharge from jail, she mysteriously passed out of sight and mind; her brother and sister disappearing at the same time."

"Perhaps the latter were only her half-brother and sister. There was some country-side talk to that effect, but whether true or not I am unable to say. But doubtless you will already have divined that they have remained with her since, and are still her secret coadjutors in the persons of Richards, the footman, and Johnson, the lady's-maid. In those old days they had rejoiced in the sobriquets, respectively, of Romany Ralph and Mincing Meg."

"Directly after the disappearance of the trio from their familiar haunts, Dinah Snow, the old negro nurse, who had been the chief witness for the prosecution at the trial, was found brutally murdered in her cabin—stabbed to the heart while asleep. The Gypsy mother, who had disdained to follow her children into exile, was instantly suspected."

"But a visit to the little hut in the swamp found but her dead body, with every appearance of having died in an apoplectic fit, for she had been an enormously corpulent old woman."

"So the murder of the faithful old nurse remained a mystery, though there was the sug-

gestion that either Ralph or Meg might have secretly slipped back from somewhere to perform the avenging deed. As for Gyp herself, the memory of her beauty lingered. It was not thought that she would have been quite capable of it."

"Beauty in woman is a wonderful softener of the heart. Long as Gyp had lived in that community, they did not know her."

"A month or two later, Planter Farley was killed by a fall from his horse. His son and heir at once started upon a career of prodigal extravagance, that promised to quickly rid him of his patrimony; but was frequently heard to declare in his cups that he still loved his vanished wife to madness, and would one day possess her, or set out in a pursuit of her that should only end with his life or hers."

"I somehow seemed fated to be thrown across that woman's path in life."

"Eight years later, I was sought out by an Italian detective of my acquaintance in Venice, who wished me to go with him to see an American lady, whose arrest he had assisted at, on the charge of having robbed a young nobleman, whose mistress she had briefly been, of his mother's jewels and other valuable heirlooms."

"The young gentleman had considerably blown out his brains, presumably at the discovery of the woman's true character, and the charge was being pressed by the indignant and scandalized relatives."

"I followed my companion to the hotel in which my fair compatriot was under guard; some officials were required to stand aside, and I was ushered into a luxurious suite of apartments, only to find myself once more in the presence of the frozen smile."

"She had merely changed by growing more ravishingly beautiful than ever, and was richly clothed, besides being vested with the air of culture and refinement."

"How she had managed it I could not guess, but the intensely ignorant Gypsy girl had become a lady, to all outward appearances; intelligent, educated, with the grand air as to the manner born, and the mistress of several languages; and her polish had even thrown something of its transforming spell upon Romany Ralph and Mincing Meg, both of whom still bore her fast company, the former in the character of her 'secretary' and music-master, the latter as her 'reader' and companion."

"The recognition was mutual, for she has a memory of iron, and had marked me among the spectators of that Georgia court-room. She at once fastened upon me an appealing and somewhat startled look."

"I paid no attention to it whatever, for I am free to say right here that I have disliked, feared and distrusted the woman from the very first."

"A few words passed between us in the detective's presence, and then I hurried away, still disregarding her beseeching looks, whose object was sufficiently evident."

"At her trial, which speedily followed, I was produced as a witness to the prisoner's antecedents."

"I told what I knew of her, and shall never forget the masked look of hatred that she gave me for my pains. It was like a fiery glint, through a gauzy film, out of the infernal fire-crypts of the irredeemably lost."

"Through my testimony, at least in part, my lady was convicted. But once more her beauty stood by her as a friend. A light term of imprisonment in the castle of San Angelo was the only penalty imposed, and a few days later I quitted Italy."

"Two years after, when in England, I was employed with other detectives by Sir Lionel Cholmondley, who had in the mean time been lured into a marriage with our adventuress, and now, having learned her true character—which by that time should have become sufficiently notorious, in all conscience—was seeking a legal separation from her with as little publicity as possible."

"This, of course, was by reason of Sir Lionel's high place in society, which the woman had, fortunately, only been able to scandalize as the bearer of the baronet's name and title for but a fleeting period."

"My work in this case lay in ventilating and raking up the incidents in the woman's past career, which had been little short of a romance of misrepresentations, swindles, blackmailings, and even, it was whispered, of yet graver offenses."

"When I say that I succeeded satisfactorily in my task, and that it was mainly through the evidence thus collected by me that the Lady Gladys met with her deserts by being thrust out of her husband's heart and home, you can judge with what intensity her hatred for me was augmented and crystallized, so to speak."

"Sir Lionel, however, had to pay pretty dearly for his whistle. When the disgraced wife took herself off once more for pastures new, it was still with the privilege of calling herself Lady Cholmondley, together with several thousand pounds of his money and the greater part of his old family jewels. She had insisted on the retention of these last as the sole price of



her silence on some little private secret of Sir Lionel's that had come into her possession, and he had not dared to refuse her.

"Long before this I had established my principal agency in New York, with correspondents in various of the Old World capitals.

"I now returned here to remain, and did not see Lady Gladys again until a few months ago, when she made her first appearance in New York society as Mr. Wallace Hardy's second wife, and became tacitly known here, as she had been abroad, as the Mysteriously Smiling Beauty, the Mysterious Mousetrap, the Fair Lady of the Frozen Smile, and the like.

"I had never seen the first husband, the husband of the woman's girlhood, from those court-room days in Georgia till I recognized him in that miserable suicide of the conservatory.

"So you see, Miss Avie," and the narrator turned to Miss Hardy, "you could scarcely have applied to a better-informed detective than me for the consideration of your case. However, there was more or less of fate in it, I fancy. I always felt that sooner or later I would be mixed up with that woman's doings again; and I had no sooner recognized you as your father's daughter by the panelings on the coach in which you came to visit me than I suspected something of the nature of your errand. My story is finished."

It was a remarkable story, and had been listened to without a single interruption.

"I am thankful, then, for the fate that sent me to you, Mr. Grippon," said Avie, simply. "But, tell me, had you never heard of the unfortunate man following Gladys elsewhere than in New York?"

"Yes; now I remember that there were certain rumors of her being mysteriously shadowed to her annoyance by some drunken and ill-conditioned fellow in London and elsewhere. It was doubtless by this same unfortunate wretch. At any rate, he is known to have long disappeared, as a penniless wanderer, from his native place."

"I am more and more surprised now," remarked Miss St. John, "that Mrs. Hardy should have ventured to bring her personal trouble to you to day, unless with the intention of playing you some trick."

"Ah! I thought you would all be more or less surprised at that."

"Did no signs of recognition pass between you?" asked Herbert.

"None whatever—though, of course, we understood each other."

It was now very late, and Miss Hardy made haste to start for home under Herbert's escort.

At this juncture there were several light taps on the window, which reached down to a low balcony, overlooking an old-fashioned garden.

Grippon, as being nearest to the window, opened it, and their irrepressible Cheese-it stepped silently into the room.

He looked more solemn and more mouse-colored than usual, though his hard breathing betokened his having arrived in great haste.

#### CHAPTER XVIII.

##### THE IRON COUCH.

"So, it's you?" asked the detective. "I had almost forgotten that I told you of my coming here."

"But your own, your invaluable Cheese-it, boss," responded the boy, with dramatic lugubriousness, "forgets nothing."

"What brings you here?"

"A message."

"From whom?"

"From Mrs. Hardy."

"From Mrs. Hardy, and at this hour of the night?"

"Gov'nur, truth sits on my tongue like a gadfly on the silken petal of a r-r-rose. I have spoken."

"None of your heroics! The lady called at my office again!"

"At eleven prezactly, boss; and she, or her coachman, didn't stop jingling the night-bell till I hopped out of my roost and came down to her."

"What did she want?"

"Old Grip; and she still wants him—bad!"

"You didn't tell her of my being at this house?"

The lad gravely pulled down a corner of his eye, and begged to know of his master if anything particularly green was on exhibition therein.

"Well, what else?" demanded Grippon, a little impatiently.

"I've come for you to go to her, guv'nor; that's all."

"At the lady's house?"

"Yes, sir; and she's just wild."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say. The lady looked scared and uneasy, and said she wouldn't close an eye to-night till you had brought some news."

The detective turned to his companions, who had listened to this colloquy with such interest as can be imagined.

Miss Hardy and Mr. St. John were in readiness to take their departure.

"You had better go first," said he. "I will

follow shortly, and see what Mrs. Hardy wants—though we can all make a pretty shrewd guess as to that."

After they had gone, he leisurely bade Miss St. John good-night, and then took his own departure, after cautioning Cheese-it to follow at a prudent distance, lest their going away together might be noted by some spy who had followed the boy as far as the house.

"This is a lonesome neighborhood," were Miss St. John's parting words. "So be sure to take care of yourselves."

It was a smart walk to the 155th street Elevated station, and lay along the edge of many empty and more or less sunken lots.

While passing one of the latter, the detective was surrounded and beset by a number of armed ruffians with such suddenness that they seemed to form out of the air.

Alert as he had been, he was completely taken by surprise, the attack being so sudden and overwhelming as to make successful resistance impossible.

Before being quite overpowered, however, he called out to Cheese-it, and made a sign which was fortunately understood.

At all events, the boy, after a hesitating pause, suddenly darted away.

On being dragged by his captors down into a deep sunken lot near at hand, the detective suddenly renewed his resistance with such fury and desperation that three of his assailants were made to bite the dust.

But he had already been deprived of his revolver, heavy blows were fairly rained down upon him, and he was once more secured, this time by a strong strap or surcingle being buckled around his body and arms above the elbows.

As he had made no effort to cry out, beyond that first warning call to the boy, he was not gagged.

He was then led to what seemed the door of a sort of subterranean tool-house, let into the side of the bank facing the avenue.

Here he was abandoned by all his captors save three, and in these latter he thought he recognized the men who had sought to hurl him to his death from the platform of the Elevated car.

Instead of a tool-house, the door in the high bank, on being opened, showed the cave-like entrance to what seemed like a subterranean passage leading off indefinitely under the avenue, at a great depth from the surface.

Such it proved to be as one of the men, lighting a lantern, which he took from a nail in the wall, led the way onward through the tunnel, one of these behind taking the precaution to secure the door.

The tunnel seemed like a newly-built culvert that had been sealed up and abandoned soon after being built, without ever having been put to use.

There are more such useless public works in New York than is generally supposed—the silently eloquent mementoes of knavish contractors and their worthlessly expensive jobs at the taxpayers' cost.

As Grippon proceeded, he concluded that their course must be taking a very deep dip under the much-traveled avenue overhead, as none of the water or gas mains were made visible, while there was not a sound that might otherwise have been heard from the periodical rumbling of the horse-cars above.

A large, square-shaped, rock-hewn chamber was at last reached, which looked like what it probably was—a disused quarry or stone-pit, securely roofed over with heavy timbers that were covered with earth and stones on the outside, since sand and gravel could here and there be seen forcing a way through the seams.

This place was fitted up in odd corners with certain rough accommodations, as if for a rendezvous of desperate men.

A brisk fire, which furnished all the light that was necessary, was blazing in a rude fireplace to one side, and some pieces of outer clothing were hanging from stout pegs driven into the crevices of the wall.

"We'll do now," said the leader, tossing his torch to one side. "Prisoner, give yourself a rest."

He set the example by sitting down on a camp-stool, while eying the captive steadily.

Grippon had by this time secretly effected the severance of the strap about his arms and body so far that the violent effort of his powerful muscles would have set him at liberty; and but for the thought that precautions had doubtless been taken to guard the passage entrance, he would now have made the attempt, and trusted his prowess to dispose of his three immediate jailers, whom he did not regard as such formidable odds, after all.

As it was, he quietly seated himself, and regarded them calmly.

The leader tore off his disguising beard.

"Do you recognize me now, Old Grip?" he growled. "And can you imagine what is going to be done to you?"

Grippon smiled with exasperating coolness.

"Of course I recognized you from the first, Romany Ralph, alias Richards," was his re-

ply. "Your false beard could not wholly disguise you in my eyes, though I'd advise you to adopt it as every-day wear. It improves your general appearance."

"Bu'st in his crust with a hammer!" suggested one of the subordinate ruffians, a short, thick-set rascal, with a face like a gorilla's. "Can't you see he's makin' game of you, Ralph?"

With that he seized a quarryman's sledgehammer from a niche of the wall, and made a gesture with it as if more than willing to carry out the murderous suggestion without further ado.

This time the detective laughed outright.

"You poor miserable scurvy dogs!" said he, derisively. "I don't doubt the willingness of the gang of you to perform a cowardly assassination upon a helpless man, but there is an excellent reason why you will not dare harm a hair of my head."

"Drop that hammer!" commanded Ralph, seemingly without heeding the defiant words. "Now," as the order was sullenly obeyed, "trot out his bed for him, and make ready for our little pleasantry."

The men armed themselves with pairs of long, heavy tongs, such as blacksmiths use for the gripping of red-hot material, and proceeded to drag out from under the roaring fire, which was supported by a rude grating, the framework of what appeared an enormous grill, in size and shape like a short-legged prison bedstead, which was glowing red from its nest among the live coals.

They then raked out a quantity of the coals, and distributed them underneath the iron slats, that the latter might the better preserve their intense heat.

"Do you begin to understand my intention?" asked Romany Ralph, turning upon his prisoner. "It is to tie you naked upon that inviting couch."

The detective, however, laughed more pleasantly than before.

"It is really comical to hear you lieso glibly," said he. "There is something so refreshing about it."

But at this instant the three men suddenly precipitated themselves upon him.

#### CHAPTER XIX.

##### IN THE STONE CHAMBER.

SUDDEN as was the attack, however, it did not take Old Grip wholly unawares.

Leaping backward over the bench on which he had been sitting, snap! went the binding strap, and his arms were free.

Then, snatching a long-handled quarryman's sledgehammer from its niche in the rocky wall, he stood coolly at bay.

The long bench was between him and his foes, and he was, moreover, ensconced in a narrow angle of the wall, which, while affording him ample room for the free play of his terrible weapon, made it impossible for them to rush in upon him in a body.

"Haden't you better drag out a few more live coals?" he inquired, blandly. "That inviting couch will be likely to cool before you can place me upon it, nude or otherwise."

The dwarfish ruffian of the gorilla characteristics had doggedly drawn and cocked a revolver.

He was about to discharge it point blank at the detective, with as little compunction as at a chicken, when Romany Ralph knocked up his arm, with a muttered oath, at the same time thrusting him to one side, and raising to his lips a small whistle, with which he sounded three shrill, keen calls.

Instantly, and to Grippon's unaffected surprise, a dozen or more desperadoes—apparently the same as had been dismissed in the bottom of the sunken lot—came crowding into the chamber, not by the tunnel-like subterranean passage, but by a small door set in the back of the rock-hewn wall, which had thus far wholly escaped his attention.

They appeared for the most part to be Italians or Bohemians—rough, ignorant men, out of honest employment, and in readiness for any wild venture or crime through desperate poverty and hard luck.

They were openly armed with stout staves and cudgels, but the deadlier stiletto betrayed its presence with one and all.

At a signal from Romany Ralph, the entire band silently confronted the detective in his coign of advantage, which now seemed ridiculously inadequate for more than a momentary resistance, and stood eagerly ready to hurl themselves upon him in a solid, scurried mass at the next word of command.

"How about the red couch now?" called out the leader, tauntingly.

"Well, it's still cooling off, you must confess."

And the detective twirled the huge hammer, as if anxious to get to work with it, though his real anxiety was by this time of an entirely different sort.

"A word from me, and it is all up with you."

"But didn't you have the same confidence in yourself when you hurled me from the mid-air railroad curve?"



"Perhaps so."

"Or when you thought to behead me by the dry-goods elevator guillotine?"

"Humph!"

"Or when you dashed out an innocent man's brains by mistake with that cleverly-cast sign-board?"

"It may have been, curse you! But this time I shall make sure of you."

"You are mistaken. I can prove to you that you must necessarily fail in this attempt, more indubitably than in the former ones."

"Why, then?"

"Because in those attempts you were backed by your mistress's authority; while in this one you are meditating one solely upon your own responsibility, and which, if successful, would call down her vengeance upon your head."

"Preposterous! But what the deuce do you mean?"

"First tell me what would be your motive in grilling me on that red-hot bedstead, as you propose?"

"To compel you to renounce any further hostilities against my sis—against Gladys Hardy, and her present fortunes, by the exposure of her past career."

"Ah; you are at least outspoken. Well, and in the event of my refusing to make any such renunciation?"

"Gad! then you shall roast away; that is all."

"Thanks. Now suppose I should tell you that I am even now in Gladys Hardy's service; and that consequently nothing could be further from her desire than your barbarous intention of putting me to torture?"

"I should simply say that you lied, as you doubtless would be doing."

"Wrong again! Confess, at all events, that you have not conferred with your mistress since provoking her enraged displeasure by reporting to her your assassination of the Italian Count Montalvo, directly after the masquerade."

"For the first time the Gypsy adventurer manifested some hesitation."

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

"I know that just as well as I know that she could not have authorized the attacks you have this day so ignorantly made upon me, any more than she could have instigated your theft, some hours ago, of that old pocketbook from my office-desk, for the opportunity of effecting which you made yourself an incendiary."

The scoundrel produced the pocketbook with a flaunting and triumphant gesture.

"What of fire and arson," he exclaimed, "if I saw you hide it away, and then captured your treasure at last? Look!" exultantly. "I don't know what it contains, but it is from the body of the dead tramp, and surely my sis—my mistress will bless me for its recovery."

"You're a dirty thieving hound!" cried the detective, counterfeiting an indignation he was far from feeling. "But do not flatter yourself. Our Lady of the Frozen Smile will not thank you for your interference. Otherwise, she would not have called at my office for a personal consultation late this afternoon."

"She call to consult you? Impossible!"

"It is true. And she had, moreover, sent for me again to-night by that office-boy of mine you saw me call out to when I was first being overpowered."

"Ha!"

"Indeed, I was on my way to respond to her summons when you, blundering and officious ass that you are, swooped down upon me with your rag and-tag minions here."

"Richards" turned somewhat pale and bit his lip, for if there was anything in the world he feared, it was the adventuress's vengeful outbursts of anger.

But such of his unkempt followers as had understood the detective's uncomplimentary allusion to themselves began to froth and shake their heads impatiently, and this encouraged him.

The two rascals of the original trio, in fact, set about shoving back the iron bedstead in under the fireplace, of their own volition, to be once more in readiness for the human grilling that had been promised.

"What yarn are you giving me, Old Grip?" growled the master ruffian, with an attempt to conceal his uneasiness. "What could my sister want to consult you about—you whom she has reason to hate and fear above all other men?"

"That is her affair and mine."

"In other words, you can't support your absurd fiction with plausible words, and she never consulted you at all."

"Well, then, it was with regard to the Italian count you sought to hurl to his death in the railroad cut after the masquerade."

"Yes; and I saw him ground to powder by the rushing train. What! she still hopes that he may have escaped?"

"I am to discover the truth for her."

"Make yourself easy. It was under my very eyes—he could not have escaped that doom."

"We shall see about that."

"Curse the foreigner, anyway! If he would have avoided his danger, why should he have tried to struggle off that bottle of pois—that bottle of champagne, above all others?"

There was an attempt at self-justification in his tone.

"Settle that with your mistress, not with me. She'll be here soon enough to call you to account for your fresh officiousness, you fool!"

Romany Ralph suddenly lashed himself into a white fury.

"That she shall never do, or it shall be to find it too late to save you!" he roared. "Upon him, my merry men! The red-hot couch is again in readiness. Strip him for his soft repose!"

## CHAPTER XX.

## THE WOMAN TERROR.

It seemed as though the entrapped detective was irretrievably doomed.

The grill-couch, as it might be called, had once more been dragged out from under the fire, and, fairly pink-white with the incandescence, seemed eager and hungry for the smoke of broiling human flesh.

Obedient to their leader's command, for which they had long been impatient, the ruffians launched themselves *en masse* upon the man at bay, with a chorus of low, snarling cries, as of famishing wolves.

There was nothing to do but to fight like a man, or like a cornered rat.

Around and around, now up, now down, twirled, rose and fell the quarryman's sledge in those dauntless and expert hands, felling a man at every blow.

But all in vain.

It was but the resistance of a moment, and then he was down, torn from his nook, and with his assailants tumbling and piling over him, like the human wolves that they were.

"Strip him stark!" yelled Romany Ralph, wild with savage exultation. "Leave not a stitch on his carcass, and then pin him to the fiery couch! Quick! my soul hungers for his piteous whines or for his roasting flesh!"

Gripon, defenseless now, was being hustled here and there, tossed like a shuttle-cock from hand to hand, each with a hawk-like clutch.

Still, not a complaint, not a plea for mercy, had escaped from his iron lips.

He could die, be tortured, as they should find, but without so much as a sigh or a groan wrung from that indomitable heart.

His overcoat, coat and waistcoat had already been stripped from his body. Bare-headed, he was bleeding from many contusions, and, half on his back, with the glow of the red-hot couch upon his neck, two of the scoundrels were tugging at his boots, while the rest were swarming and clawing over him.

"Hold! give him an instant's respite," shouted Ralph. "Old Grip, this is your last chance. Will you or will you not renounce, under oath, your pursuit of Gladys Hardy and her interests?"

His answer was a flying kick in the midriff from one of the momentarily-relieved detective's still-booted feet, which not only sent him staggering back, completely doubled up, but sat him down for an instant plump upon red-hot cross-bars of the torture-couch.

The discomfited scoundrel bounded up with an appalling yell, and, with both hands upon his scorched posteriors, went dancing and hopping around the place as if treading on tacks.

"Kill him! roast him alive! burn him up!" he howled. "Hurry up! Squash him down on the gridiron! Jerusalem, how it hurts!"

Once more the ruffians—withstanding that some of them had not abstained from laughing outright at their leader's mishap—launched themselves, pell-mell, upon the devoted detective.

The fresh fight that he was enabled to make was but for an instant, and then he was once more defenseless in their rending clutches.

"HOLD! If a hair of that man's head is injured, it is to me that you shall render account!"

A woman's voice, and yet every miscreant fell back, abashed, before the clear, ringing accents of its command.

It was from Gladys, who had suddenly appeared in the chamber by the secret door alluded to, attended solely by the boy, Cheese-it.

She seemed to have come to the rescue in mad haste.

Her bosom rose and fell, her eyes flashed, and her pure dark cheeks were aglow with excitement and dispatch.

She had partly flung aside a voluminous cloak and hood of dark material, and stood revealed, with a grandly commanding gesture, magnificent in her anger, superb in her rebuking attitude.

The flickering coquetry of that perpetual half-smile, however, was still present, in strange and mocking contrast with her prevailing expression, as if there were something eerie and supernatural in it—as if it were necessarily her indelible characteristic in anger as in repose, in life as perhaps in death.

"Who has dared to act on his own responsibility here?"

She had taken in the nature of the attempted outrage at a glance, and the questioning looks

with which she accompanied the questioning words were like those of a despotic bandit queen in the midst of her trembling followers.

Gripon, on being again released, had merely bowed his thanks, and then, with a shrug of the shoulders, coolly began to recover and put on such of his garments as had been torn from his person.

He now looked up with another bow to Gladys, and then pointed to Romany Ralph.

"There's the head and front of this offending, ma'am," said he. "But pray, whatever else you may demand of him, do not ask him to sit down. It is a posture that may cause him inconvenience for some time to come."

Ralph, or Richards, who still had both hands pressed suggestively to his after parts, which had not yet done smoking, culy scowled and hung his head; without making any answer.

The subordinate ruffians had huddled together, like so many frightened sheep.

"Come here, Bigor!" She beckoned to the thick-set, gorilla-faced man, who stepped slouchingly forward at her bidding. "Whose weapon is that?" for he was still holding in his hand the revolver with which he had threatened the detective's life.

Bigor, as she called him, indicated, with a sullen gesture, the detective as the weapon's owner.

"Restore it to the gentleman instantly—on your bended knee!"

The fellow, who had started to obey, drew back with a furious scowl.

"This instant, I tell you! What! would you dare—?"

Her face had suddenly taken on a demoniac cast, and, with a lightning-like movement, a jeweled dagger glistened in her jeweled hand.

Bigor turned pale through his hideousness, and the detective's revolver was straightway restored to him in the ignominious manner commanded.

Gladys then drew from the folds of her mantle a heavy purse, which she placed in Bigor's hands, with these words:

"The Followers are doubtless here in this business under the mistaken notion that it was at my behest, no less than at his," with a scornful gesture toward the crestfallen but still scowling Ralph. "Divide the contents of this purse among them, and remember!" raising her voice, and comprehending the minions *en masse* in her haughty glance; "hereafter, under peril of my displeasure—you ought all to know what that means—ye are not to assemble or to act save at the flash of the ring. Go!"

She had suddenly, probably by turning outward a ring's setting which had heretofore been concealed, flashed upon them a jeweled wonder upon her outstretched hand, which caused a general and servile obeisance on the part of the desperate gang.

Without a word, they trooped out of the place, led by Bigor, their hard faces mutely expressive of their satisfaction.

Romany Ralph would have gone with them, but that an imperious sign from Gladys caused him to remain.

Gladys, Old Grip and he, together with Cheese-it, who still remained, silent and alert, by the little door, were then alone in the great fire-lit rock-chamber, that looked all the more savage and picturesque for being thus comparatively deserted.

Gladys turned abruptly upon her remaining minion.

"Why have you not been with me at intervals during the day, to learn my wishes?" she demanded.

"Time pressed," was the sullen reply. "There was much to be done. I thought to act on my responsibility."

Her eyes flashed and her bosom heaved. If she was affecting a displeasure which she did not feel, for the deception of the detective—who was watching her narrowly beneath an assumed carelessness of manner—he had to confess to himself that she was doing it to perfection.

"So!" she went on, sternly; "your overweening self-conceit has led you into a series of blunders, for which I am to suffer in Mr. Gripon's estimation. I have received some inkling of your misdoings from yonder little boy, who so cleverly hurried me here to your victim's rescue. Dog! what have you to say for yourself?"

## CHAPTER XXI.

## A WOMAN IN LOVE.

ROMANY RALPH was at last stung to the quick by Gladys's harsh imperiousness.

Something of his obsequiousness gave way to an angry and sneering expression.

"Oh, bosh!" he growled; "don't push your high-and-mightiness too far, or I may spit out something for the enlightenment of your detective friend there."

The woman's eyes blazed magnificently afresh.

"What! you cur," she exclaimed; "you would deem me shallow enough to attempt the deception of Old Grip as to myself and my ancient belongings? Half-brother mine, you are witless."



ly mistaken there. Come, then; it is not as Gladys Hardy, the rich merchant's wife, but as Gyp Farley, the whilom fortune-teller and heretofore adventuress, that I now call you to account before him."

Ralph looked at her uneasily, for she had not reckoned that the boy Cheese-it was also within hearing; and even the detective regarded her bold self-unmasking to himself, in spite of what she must have guessed of his secret knowledge of her past, as an odd move on her part.

"So," she continued, still sternly addressing herself to Ralph, "it was not enough, it seems, that you should attempt, and perhaps accomplish," she slightly paled, "the assassination of my good friend, Count Montalvo—"

"He had stolen the bottle containing the remains of—"

She silenced him with an imperious gesture.

"You not only attempted that, but, as I learn from that faithful little boy, you have also, on your own responsibility, to say nothing of more recent and more murderous attempts, stolen something of value from this gentleman's office-desk."

"It is a pocketbook," burst out Ralph, "that he had obtained from the person of that dead tramp! Here it is!"

He produced it triumphantly, as if confident that this would replace him in Gladys's good graces.

Indeed, she did look as if she would like to pounce upon the treasure without ceremony. The detective, on his part, had feigned a start of consternation; and then, feeling her glance upon him, he lowered his eyes.

"Is this true, Mr. Grippon?" she asked.

"The pocketbook and its contents are of important value to me, I must confess," was his evasive and feignedly reluctant reply.

Gladys seemed to be undergoing an inward struggle, but she resolutely withdrew the longing gaze she was casting at the pocketbook.

"Restore Mr. Grippon's property to him!" she commanded, peremptorily.

Romany Ralph looked at her in astonishment; but, seeing that she was painfully in earnest, was about to comply.

But here the detective waved him back.

"By Heaven! I shall not receive it back, madam, until you shall have deigned to inspect its contents first!" he exclaimed, impulsively. "You have come to my rescue nobly. Valuable as the article may be to me, you shall not wholly outdo me in generosity."

Gladys seemed unaffectedly pleased.

"I thank you for this expression of your confidence, sir," said she, taking the wallet. "If we are to remain at swords' points, in the main issue of my past career as it may clash with my present false position in society, let it be as generous, not as sneaking and merciless, foes."

The detective bowed.

As a matter of course, the examination of the wallet, and its contents proved a bitter disappointment to Gladys, since the reader will remember the trick by which Old Grip had misled the spying Ralph, while cunningly secreting the really important pocketbook in a receptacle attached to his underclothing; and where, indeed, its presence might have been betrayed, had the plan to strip him altogether for the torture not been so opportunely interrupted.

"Why, what is this?" and Gladys turned upon her luckless confidential agent with fresh rage, of whose genuineness there could not now be the slightest question. "Ass! dolt! idiot! Apart from the villainy of your theft, how could you imagine that they could be of any moment to me?"

The documents in the decoy wallet, as it might be called, merely referred to a dead and wholly irrelevant detective case in which Old Grip had once been interested, and were, it is scarcely necessary to say, of no real importance to him whatever.

"Wh—what's the matter?" stammered the bravo. "True, I hadn't had time to examine the papers myself as yet; but don't they—don't they have any connection with—with that dead chap?"

"No, no, not with anything else that I know or care anything about, fool! marplot!" and having thrust back the papers, she angrily beat him over the face with the distended covers. "Here is your property, Mr. Grippon," and with an angry laugh she tossed the wallet to the detective. "Thanks for your magnanimity just the same, though you were perfectly safe in practicing it in this instance."

Her humiliated half brother had folded his arms, and was regarding her with a look half-pity, half-malevolence.

"What more for me, Lady Gyp Farley-Gladys-Cholmondley-Hardy?" he asked, with his covert sneer.

She looked as if about to spring upon him, but turned away with a scornfully dismissive gesture and her short laugh.

"Bugone!" she commanded, abruptly. "That much for you! My carriage—a public one—is waiting me in the boulevard. Tarry there till I return!"

He quitted the cavern without another word, Cheese-it gliding aside from the deep-set door to give him egress.

Gladys shivered slightly, and drew her mantle more closely about her.

Then she wearily sunk upon one of the benches near the great chimney-fire, which was still burning ruddily, and motioned the detective to an adjoining seat.

"I have something to say to you, sir," said she composedly. "Perhaps we can come to something like an explanation."

"Shall I dismiss the boy?"

"You trust him, do you not?"

"Implicitly."

"Then let him remain. Besides, he is scarcely within hearing."

Then she looked at the detective steadily, even the flutter of her inadvertent smile almost disappearing in the deep gravity of her manner.

"Confess," she said, "that it puzzles you, my having sought your advice and then hurrying to your rescue here—you whom of all men I have the most cause to hate and fear."

"I confess that it surprises me."

Her lip curled.

"Another name for 'mystifies,' which you are too proud or too politic to utter."

The detective did not reply.

"However, I shall explain," she went on. "It is really through my crying need for the assistance which I am convinced that no other detective but you could give me that has caused me to apply to you, and through no hope whatever to placate you in a general way—that is, to cause you to cease your hostilities against me in my step-daughter's interest."

There was something like a query in the concluding words, which the detective made haste to dispose of by an unmistakable gesture.

"That is well, madam," said he, with quiet decisiveness, "well, I mean that you should not entertain such a hope."

"And yet why not? At all events, I have perhaps this night saved your life, when mere indifference on my part might have put you forever beyond the power of undermining and injuring me."

"Granted," uneasily, but not the less unrelentingly.

"Of course, you will think that such interference sprung out of mere selfishness on my part—a hope to obtain some information as to the fate of Count Montalvo in return before letting you be murdered?"

"It is what I think."

"And yet you are only half right. Listen. I own that I fear you—would sooner treat with than defy you, if that were possible."

"Madam, you deserve that I should be frank with you. It is not possible."

"But listen first. Is it not possible that I should make a lasting truce with Avice, through you?"

He shook his head, but she hurried on, with renewed earnestness:

"That is, suppose I should engage—give satisfactory surety, you know—to interfere with her and her rights and prospects in no way whatever; might she not, on her part, agree to leave me in the enjoyment of my one and sole desire, which is to let my miserable dead past bury its dead—to redeem myself—to deserve and enjoy my present good fortune, my newly-attained social position, and my husband's love?"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A STRANGE CONFERENCE.

THERE was an intense, though veiled, appeal in her manner, no less than her words; but the detective shook his head as uncompromisingly as before.

"Not possible!" he repeated.

She seemed to be stifling a passionate outburst.

"Why not?"

"Miss Hardy, in justice to society, her family honor and herself, could not entertain such a compact as you suggest."

"Don't spare me—be explicit. Why not?"

"A past of crime is not to be thus philosophically condoned."

"Of crime?"

"Certainly."

"But I merely lived by my wits. The masquerading plots and intrigues of an adventuress would rather come under the head of misdemeanors than crimes."

"Granted, but—murder?"

"Murder!"

"Woman, woman! would you mince with me? Three murders are already at your door, and freshly at that, as you well know."

"I do not know."

"Must I then specify?"

"That would be better," with forced calmness.

"First, then, the victim of the sign-board—the poor workman unintentionally assassinated in your interest and in my place."

"This is interesting, if preposterous. But go on."

"Second, the decapitation of the unoffending old gentleman, Mr. Stuyvesant Vanderhuysen, under similar circumstances."

"Better and better!" though with less assured sarcasm. "But," with an ominous knitting of the brows, "proceed."

"I shall not include these last attempts of your half-brother on my life, which seem to have been made on his own responsibility."

"Thank you."

"Lastly, then, the murder by poison of the tramp in your conservatory—of the tramp, otherwise Joseph Farley, your first husband!"

She sprang to her feet in a white rage, her hand reaching into her bosom, as if instinctively, for that jeweled dagger of hers.

"Let me counsel patience," urged the detective, imperturbably. "Remember, you bade me not to spare you."

"Patience, and in the face of such a charge!" she cried, huskily. "Good God!—but let it go." She partly controlled her passion and resumed her seat with her short laugh, which now, however, had something dangerous in it. "Farley filled a drunkard's grave long, long ago. The fellow was a nameless tramp. If he died of poison, as is quite possible, it was by his own act."

"Let it go, as you say," conciliatingly. "But you will doubtless agree with me that a past such as that of *La Belle Dame Souriante Mystérieuse* is not to be condoned or bargained into oblivion."

"I agree to nothing of the sort."

"What! Why, even apart from all that I have charged, your present double-life is irretrievably against you."

"My double-life!"

"Of course; your home-life, we will say, as a social and fashionable star; your—other life, as a restless, unscrupulous *intrigante*, and here, as revealed to me to-night, as little less than a bandit queen—the despotic ruler of unquestioning, desperate and murderous hirelings."

Gladys smiled.

"I confess to that," she said, composedly. "But it is a twofold life that has been forced upon me by tyrannous circumstances. Many of these wild followers of mine, creatures of my beck—and you have not seen half of them—were in my pay abroad, far away, and in many a varied scene. But they would have long since been disbanded and scattered but for you."

"Indeed!"

"Ay; for the mere fact of your being in the same city with me—a fact which I was careful to ascertain soon after my arrival on these shores as Wallace Hardy's bride—was a standing menace that I could not afford to disregard."

"So!"

"What! could I forget the past, and how you had time and again crossed my purposes, tracked me down, and conjured up my antecedents, to my ignominy and defeat? No, no; no sooner did I know of your being in New York than I felt that it was fated you should cross me yet again—or attempt to. I was prepared for you. Though you did not suspect it, your first move, as against me in Avice Hardy's interest, found me bristling in my self-defense—armed at every point."

"True; I did not suspect the completeness of your preparations."

"Do they not warn you back?"

"Not in the least."

"Not even after your to-night's experience here?"

"Not even after that; though I acknowledge that it was a close call for me, and am not unmindful of your service in my behalf—a service, however, which shall be liquidated in full."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I shall tell you presently."

"Thanks. And you are unequivocally indebted to me for to-night's work. It was at much risk to my reputation that I managed to escape from my palace home at such an hour and on such an errand."

"I can imagine that. But doubtless you have your own private suite of apartments, while your devoted Mincing Meg would also have facilitated your object."

"Yes; and Miss Williams, a clever seamstress now in my employ, was no less invaluable in the emergency. In fact, she was brave enough to accompany me, and now awaits my return in the coach I succeeded in hiring."

She bent her eyes searchingly upon the detective as she spoke, but he gave no sign of added interest in the apparently irrelevant information.

"Perhaps you will now tell me how you propose to repay the service I have rendered you?" she asked.

"I shall. In the first place, oblige me by taking this back."

He had produced his pocketbook, out of which he tendered her the check she had given him as a retainer in the Montalvo affair.

"What is this for?" she asked.

"I wish to serve you, in turn, and without pecuniary compensation."

"I shall not permit that. Money from day to day is no object with me. Retain the check, or, bitter as the disappointment may cost me, I shall refuse the service for which it was proffered in advance payment. I am in earnest."

She was more than that, she was angry. Old Grip accordingly took back the check from her hand, and restored it to his pocket.

"Montalvo lives," he said.



Her eyes lighted, a softening look springing into her face. She arose, approaching him with clasped hands.

"Bless you for this one boon, Ned Grippon, whatever else betide!" she exclaimed. "But, fearfully, 'are you sure?'"

"I have seen him—conversed with him."

"What! and yet he makes no sign to me?"

"It is impossible."

"And yet he is alive and well?"

"Yes; though your accursed Romany Ralph nearly did for him! The poor devil of a track-man died in his place."

She eyed him with suspicion.

"He knows of my—my interest in him—must imagine my more than interest!" she murmured, chokingly. "Why should he have kept me in the horrible suspense I have endured?"

"Still, the man was terribly shaken by the narrowness of his escape from that horrible fate. Besides, he is in some private straits. His incognito at your *bal masque* must have proved that to you."

"True, true; and yet—" abruptly, and with fresh suspicion: "Grippon, how am I to know that you are not deceiving me?"

"What interest could I have in only pretending to have seen Montalvo?"

"Well, it would be one point against me in favor of Avico Hardy."

"You are right. It would be to my interest to deceive you on general principles; a deception, however, of which I am incapable."

"How am I to know that?"

"By this token, which Montalvo bade me give you."

He produced the ring she had passed to her Mephistophelian partner of that momentous waltz.

Her face cleared as she seized it, not hesitating to press her lips to the costly bauble.

"Ah! I can doubt no longer. But wait—it was my gift, and yet he returns it to me?"

"I suppose he foresaw the incredulity you have just manifested. Could it be otherwise? How else could you believe in the reality of his escape from that doom? Even Ralph is honest in his belief that he saw his intended victim dashed and mangled to death under his very eyes, and those of his fellow-ruffians."

"I understand. Did the count give you the details of his escape?"

"He did. It was little short of a miracle."

"How was it?"

The detective described the adventure, Gladys listening with whitening cheek and bated breath.

Notwithstanding the suddenness of her unprincipled passion for the counterfeit Montalvo, there could be no doubt as to its genuineness.

Grippon was at last compelled to this belief, and he was at the same time beginning to obtain some insight into this strange and terrible woman's character. A character of wonderful contradictions! As the adventuress, she was ruthless, murderous, calculating—unhesitatingly criminal and desperate to the core. As the woman, she was headlong, reckless—the eager creature of her passion's latest whim, even to the ruin of what her criminal worldliness might at the same moment be struggling, scheming and murdering for. She would not even hesitate to imperil her new social triumph as Wallace Hardy's wife for the gratification of that counter or passionate side of her nature. "Montalvo" was her latest whim, while, before his entrance into the theater of her unprincipled life, she had contented herself perforce to fascinating the worship of her step-son, and then playing with it as with a lapdog, with her thoughts far away for that next hoped-for object of her dangerous yet honest devotion. A Messalina blended with a Brinvilliers!

"Thank God, he escaped!" exclaimed Gladys, clasping her hands, when the harrowing details had been given; "thank God for that! But"—anxiously—"surely he can't connect me with that foul attempt upon his life?"

"Oh, no; how should he? You as the mistress of that superb entertainment, which is already the talk of the town! He must look upon you as one of our great social queens."

"True!" relievedly. "And you—you will not, or have not, enlightened him to the contrary?"

"He has not and will not learn from me any more of you than he obtained as his first impression."

"What was that impression, think you?"

The detective gazed calmly into the beautiful face, in which the flickering half-smile was now at its loveliest as she waited in scarcely-disguised eagerness for his reply.

"You cannot but be aware of your marvelous fascinations, madam. The man is impressed to the core."

She blushed with pleasure, her black eyes flashing.

"When can he meet me?"

"Within a week. He is to let me know, and then I shall tell you."

"Good! good! And then I can arrange for a secret meeting. But so long to wait! Cannot you even tell me where the count is stopping?"

"I must not."

"Nor why he is compelled to remain incognito?"

"Nor that either."

She rose, once more muffling herself in her mantle, and held out her hand. As the detective took it he marked and noted the wonderful ring at whose magic flash her ruffianly minions—The Followers, as she had called them—had cowered so subserviently at her command.

"Grippon," said she, "hunt me down if you can—and don't be too sure that you can," with a somber smile. "But for this night's services you have my heart's gratitude. Only bring Count Montalvo once more to me, and I ask no more. You can accompany me as far as my conveyance, if you will."

Followed by Cheese-it, they passed through the secret door, then along a narrow, up-reaching passage, and were soon in the open air, near a roadway in which the coach was waiting. Gladys entered it, with a slight gesture of farewell, and was rapidly driven away.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### A WEEK LATER.

AFTER that eventful night in the quarry-chamber, Grippon altogether disappeared from his New York haunts for a space of six days.

At the end of that period, in the early forenoon of a bright day, he suddenly reappeared in his official roost, and was received by his mouse-colored sprite with no more effusion than if he had been merely absent over night.

"Any callers in the case?" he demanded.

"One, day before yesterday" was the owlish reply.

"Who?"

"Frozen Smile."

"Ah! did she seem surprised at my absence from the city?"

"Worse than that, gov'nor."

"How?"

"Mad and troubled, though she smiled at last, patted me on the head, said I was a good boy, and gave me a dollar," and Cheese-it gave one of his fleeting but oracular grins.

"What reason did you assign for my sudden departure?"

"Sudden call in the Jellingby forgery case."

"That is well," half to himself, "since my name has been prominently connected with that case; though I doubt if my lady would be deceived. However, let it go." Then, after a pause: "You advised Boston Nell to contrive a conference with me this afternoon?"

"Boss," and Cheese-it laid his hand on his heart, while rolling up his eyes, "I did."

"How did you get word with her?"

"Called boldly on her ladyship yesterday—yes, boldly and in person—to tell her that I thought you'd be back some time to-day in the afternoon. Was admitted into her budwer and fairly petted to death for my news; Durin' the interestin' interview I gave Nell the twig."

Grippon was not in the habit of even smiling at his Ariel's eccentricities, but he did so now, and approvingly at that.

"You did well," said he. "Back to your lookout now. I am expecting a visitor, and will want you to watch the outside of my door against a chance eavesdropper or keyhole expert."

The visitor presently appeared in the person of Miss Avico Hardy.

Grippon smilingly received her, and she gave him the cordial hand-clasp of an old friend.

Before conducting her to a chair, however, he had thrown a glance in the street below, as upon the occasion of their first interview.

"You did not make the mistake of coming in the Hardy family-coach this time, I see."

"No, indeed," with a laugh. "Do you think I would forget your warning of that first day? A cab was good enough for me."

"And yet you have been followed, as before."

"What!" she was at the window in an instant. "But really now, Mr. Grippon, are you not mistaken? I see no one but that gawky red-whiskered countryman on the street-corner."

"Richards again."

"Heavens, are you sure?" and she sat down, indignant and pale.

"Yes; and he has doubtless dogged your movements incessantly in one disguise or another from that first day. But don't be alarmed."

"I'm not alarmed; I'm—furious!" and the young girl was, indeed, very angry.

"But you need not even trouble yourself over the matter, though of course I understand your sense of indignation. Gladys will not dare to meditate actual harm against you so long as I have the Montalvo complication in hand; of that I feel assured. Come now, Miss Hardy, let us proceed with our complication, as against hers."

"Very good, then, Mr. Grippon," said Avico, recovering her composure. "Of course, I got your message warning me of the journey you have taken."

"Can you imagine where I have been?"

"I cannot."

And instantly Avico was all curiosity.

"To Georgia."

"Ah! I begin to understand."

"You must do so, with your quick wit. I have been to the scene of Gladys Hardy's—or let us say Gyp Farley's—girlhood's crimes."

"May I ask to what purpose?"

"Certainly; to have in readiness on demand the necessary witnesses of identification, should she undertake to make a court denial as to her earlier antecedents when at last I pin her to the earth."

"And did you succeed?"

"To my utmost satisfaction."

"But aren't you afraid that she has suspected you to have been absent on just this errand?"

"I don't care if she has."

"Why?"

"The Montalvo passion engrosses her. Besides, she considers herself secure against me here. Let me tell you of my remarkable adventures after quitting the St. John, where I had my last interview with you."

Avico Hardy was then for the first time made acquainted with the extraordinary scenes and happenings in the quarry-chamber.

She listened aghast and almost as one in a dream.

"Can such things be in this age, and here in the midst of populous New York?" she exclaimed. "Heavens! it sounds like some hideous romance."

"But none the less true."

"Mr. Grippon, I wonder that you're alive!" said Avico, after surveying him in silence for some moments. "And such horrible dangers you are constantly encountering in my behalf." Her lip quivered. "How can I ever repay you?"

"Not only in your behalf, Miss Avico, but also in that of humanity and justice." Then with a swift, dismissive gesture: "Now what do you think of Gladys's sense of her own security?"

"I am simply astounded. What a woman! My only fear is that I shall no longer be able to treat her with even the outer semblance of respect at home."

"That you must force yourself to do at all hazards. You will at once perceive the necessity of doing so."

"Certainly. Now tell me one thing. Gladys must depend upon something else that shall enable her to combat you successfully, other than the unscrupulous devotion of The Followers—her slaves at the flash of the ring. Am I right?"

"You are."

"And that is upon my dread of the crushing family disgrace consequent upon the exposure of her terrible antecedents?"

"It is."

"Cannot that be averted?"

"It cannot."

Avico seemed almost ready to burst into tears, when the detective ventured to take her hand. His voice when he spoke also showed how profoundly he deplored her sense of mortification and dismay.

"Miss Avico," he said, "it must be so. I would move heaven and earth to spare your family the scandal that must ensue—in fact, it was doubtless chiefly with this end in view that you sought my services—but it is simply impossible. The woman's crimes since her flaunting it here in New York high society as your father's young wife forbid it in the cause of common morality."

"I see that, I see that!" half-sobbed the young girl.

"Mere shadiness of antecedents may be glozed out of sight in the ousting of an adventuress from her foothold in an honorable home (money, influence, *finesse* may accomplish that), but her capital crimes—never! It would be unjust, it would be immoral to attempt such a thing, even were it possible."

"Yes," though very faintly.

"Miss Avico, be brave. Your family honor is perhaps more precious to you than life itself—"

"It is, it is!"

"But you would not, I am sure, even in that interest, shield or compromise with murder?"

"Never!" She caught away her hand and started energetically to her feet; "never! Poor papa!" she added, sorrowfully; "it would almost kill him. But that would happen, publicity or no publicity, and, come what may, justice must and shall be done."

"Come, now, that is the true spirit of which I knew you were capable," cried the detective, cheerfully. "Sit down, now, Miss Avico, and tell me how it has been going at home."

"Badly enough in the best sense," replied the young lady, resuming her seat, "though finely enough in the worst of Gladys's sense. My lady has of course carried it with a high hand. But she no longer seems to regard me with her wonted suspicion and dislike. In fact, of her conduct toward myself I could have little cause to complain, were I ignorant of her terrible true character. She has made advances, as if not only willing but anxious to placate me and make me more tolerant of what she must know that I know of her antecedents. As for my brother, he is more hopelessly in the toils of her fascinations than ever, though any one else could see that she really cares nothing for



him save as a *cavaliere servante*; while my father, confined to the house by his gout, permits, seems even glad to have her come and go at her own sweet will, dotingly trustful and content with a passing smile or a caress. Heavens! with an involuntary shudder, "when I see her kiss him it makes my blood run cold."

"For the rest, she confines herself almost exclusively to her own suite of apartments, and might almost be said to have a separate establishment. It is the grand European style of married life to which she has been accustomed, she says. And my father, poor man, puts up with it readily enough, inordinately vain, it would seem, in the mere outward possession of such a highly ornamental piece of property as his beautiful young wife of the mysteriously enchanting smile. Meanwhile, the domestics of the entire establishment, together with all our horses and carriages, are absolutely at her disposal—a vested right which she jealously maintains. Why, it has come to that pass that I hardly dare order out my own pony and village-cart without asking her permission. It is this state of affairs that enabled her to go to you at midnight in that horrible rendezvous so boldly, and without fear of questioning."

"That will do now, Miss Avicé," said the detective. "My next move is to arrange for my lady's meeting with her idolized Montalvo. The end draws near."

The young lady looked at him with such a troubled air that he made haste to add:

"Remember, my dear young lady, that the woman is not Mr. Wallace Hardy's wife, having had no legal right to contract the alliance."

"Thank God for that! and I understand you, sir," said Miss Hardy, somewhat reassured. "And yet—"

He interrupted her with a kindly gesture, and then went on:

"I know your thought, and shall reply to it. Miss Hardy, I may be only a detective, but I am none the less a gentleman. You will acknowledge that what has evolved out of my simple personation of the absent nobleman could not have been foreseen by me?"

"Oh, yes!" eagerly.

"And that in continuing the rôle, thus forced upon me, to the betrayal of this wicked woman's schemes, through a pretended surrender to her emotional demands, I am pursuing a task profoundly repugnant and abhorrent to my nature?"

"Yes, yes; it must be so."

"Thank you," he held out his hand. "Can you not then trust me for the rest?—that is, in using this painfully delicate side-intrigue to the advantage of our general counterplot against the common enemy, without going a single step further than I ought?"

His manner was so frank, so kind, so gentle. It was almost with a smile that she trustingly placed her hand in his.

"Good-by, and be of good heart, my friend!" were Grippon's parting words to his fair client. "You shall be duly advised of the progress of our cause—already hastening on to triumph with giant strides."

She had no sooner passed out of view than he glanced out of the window.

The gawky red-whiskered countryman was still on the street-corner.

"Cheese-it!"

The boy appeared.

"Here"—the detective was writing with lightning-like rapidity—"this for the Frozen Smile in two hours' time."

Then, seizing his hat and overcoat, Old Grip was off like the wind, scarcely thirty seconds in the track of Miss Hardy's evanishment.

The paper left for *La Belle Dame du Souris Glacé* contained the following words, undated and unsigned:

"Montalvo impatiently awaits the signorina's commands."

Reaching the sidewalk just as Miss Hardy was being driven away in her cab, the detective suddenly jostled against the countryman, who was hurrying in pursuit.

Now it chanced, by a strange coincidence, that this encounter was almost an exact duplicate, in time and place, with the one of a fortnight or so previous, and that the unoccupied offices in the basement presented precisely the same facilities for a private settlement of grievances as on the first occasion.

"What's up, stranger?" angrily demanded the pretended rustic, bristling up from the collision. "Think you own the hull airth an' me too, thet you go bu'stin' into me like a steam bullgine?"

Grippon folded his arms, regarding him with cold contempt.

"Because I own you," he replied.

Then there was a flashing gesture, away flew the shock of red beard, and the spurious footman was again unmasked.

"Fool!" exclaimed the detective; "have you so soon forgotten your primary lesson in this self-same spot, that you would thus tempt its repetition?"

As before, the street was momentarily devoid of traffic, and the words and action seem-

ed to goad the unmasked ruffian into a murderous frenzy.

"Remember the quarry cave!" he roared, suddenly producing a formidable knife and launching himself forward.

"Remember the sign-board!" coolly responded Old Grip, standing motionless, hands down, as if utterly regardless of the other's headlong rush.

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

##### A BIT OF LEGERDEMAIN.

ROMANY RALPH fairly gnashed his teeth while precipitating himself upon his apparently inert or paralyzed foe, but it was with exultation, so surely did murderous revenge seem within his grasp.

Suddenly, however, as the Irishman said of the flea, the detective wasn't there—or not at least in the same place.

He seemed to melt away from the savage onset and the descending knife like the veriest phantom, though there could be no doubt as to the substance of what remained of him.

Crash, crash! flew the trained blows from the shoulder, and again, as in the former instance, the ruffian went rolling down the basement steps into the unoccupied corridor, whose broad entrance chanced to be open, his impotent knife flying in one direction, the red wig of his disguise in another.

There the detective pummeled him to his heart's content, after which he contemptuously bade him rise.

The fellow did so, sullen and defiant still, notwithstanding the wholesome drubbing he had received.

"It was a personal satisfaction I could not deny myself," remarked Old Grip, with his customary coolness. "But I suppose nothing will wholly satisfy you till the hangman's cord is fairly about your throat."

"Richards" made no reply, but began to resume his disguise with trembling hands, while casting a longing glance at the knife, lying a few feet away.

The detective coolly placed the weapon at an angle against the wainscot, and his foot upon the blade. Snap! and it was useless.

"I'd search you for some other weapon, but that I know it would be useless," continued Grippon, once more eying the baffled scoundrel contemptuously. "Had you a revolver, you'd have drawn it instead of the knife."

"You're right; I would," admitted the other, with a wolfish look from behind the rehabilitated beard, that in a measure concealed his disfigurements.

"Shouldn't you be about satisfied of the futility of these murderous attempts against me?"

This was said in a peculiar tone that caused Richards first to start, and then apparently to wonder, as if stricken with a new thought.

"Perhaps I should," he muttered, with an oath. "By the red fires of hell! it may be that you do bear a charmed life."

Old Grip knew the superstitiousness of the man's race and nature, for, notwithstanding their stock-in-trade is in preying upon the credulity of others, the Gypsies themselves in their heathenish way are superstitious to the core; and he resolved to take advantage of it through the exercise of his sleight-of-hand dexterity, which was not the least of his accomplishments.

He produced his revolver, there was a lightning-like manipulation of the weapon, of which the closest observer must have been wholly unaware, and then he banded it to Romany Ralph.

"Move back six paces," said he, "and then confront me."

The Gypsy obeyed.

"Now examine the charges in the weapon."

It was done.

"Are the chambers all loaded?"

"Yes."

"Are you a good shot?"

"Fair to middling."

The detective threw open his coat, offering his broad breast as the target, throwing back his head a little, and dropping his hands to his sides.

"Take aim!"

"Hold on!" cried the other, by this time greatly excited. "The shot will be heard on the street—if I kill you in this public place, what show will be left for me?"

"There is a small door at the rear of this long corridor; it is always unlocked, and opens into a court; directly beyond is another corridor communicating with the next business street. In one minute after killing me, you can, after dropping the weapon—my own, remember—be mingling unconcernedly among the busy throngs of Wall and Broad streets. Once more, take aim!"

The ruffian did so with savage promptitude, his eyes fairly blazing with bloodthirsty anticipation.

"Have you got me dead?"

"To a hair."

"Fire!"

The pistol exploded. Grippon stood unharmed and smiling, with the bullet between his teeth!

At first the ruffian did not seem to understand. Then, with horrified eyes and knocking

knees, he dropped the pistol—even as he might have done, as instructed, in the event of the shot having proved fatal—turned and fled along the corridor like a frightened deer.

"So!" thought the detective, resuming the weapon. "It was a piece of legerdemain that may stick in his crop long enough to be of some use to me, though I doubt it. However, there's no fear of another sign-board episode, I fancy." And he hurried away.

Early in the afternoon Grippon had the interview he had appointed with Eleanor Williams—Boston Nell.

The young woman was looking uncommonly well, and was better dressed than he had ever seen her before.

"My lady's service seems to be agreeing with you," observed the detective, after receiving her greeting.

"Yes; I have every cause to be satisfied. My mistress has made such a favorite of me as to cause Johnson to detest me thoroughly. She gave this suit I am wearing. It is perfectly new and had been made for herself, though she took a dislike to it."

"Humph! Anything new from the boudoir to report to me?"

"But little that I think you would care to know, except that my lady is still sighing for her Montalvo."

"Does she then betray an impatience to see him again?"

"To a woman's perception like mine, yes, and in many womanish ways. For instance—"

"Spare me the particulars. It is sufficient to know the fact. I judge that you have continued to withstand temptation, or you would not have progressed so swimmingly."

"I have been as honest as an angel, Mr. Grippon. There's no hour of the day and night that I couldn't make off with ten thousand dollars' worth of jewelry if I chose, but I have held out, and bravely."

"You're doing finely, Nell. Stick to the task I have assigned you, and you shall have your reward. I have already spoken to Miss Avicé about your little boy."

The young woman clasped her hands, a soft light coming into her comely but ordinarily unsympathetic face.

"What did she say—what will she do for him?" she exclaimed.

"Everything that can be done for both him, and you, too, for the pair of you, if you only prove worthy of her benefactions. Indeed, Miss Hardy is already much interested."

Avicé's sympathies had, indeed, been enlisted in the case of reclaiming the shoplifter and looking after the welfare of both mother and child, though the conversation between her and the detective leading thereto has been omitted in the foregoing.

Boston Nell's eyes sparkled.

"God bless the young lady!" she exclaimed; "she has such a sweet, good face, one might know her for an angel on sight. Oh! I'll bite off my fingers before they shall ever steal again. I will be honest and square—I will deserve her goodness—I will, indeed, Old Grip!"

"I sincerely hope so," said the detective, gravely; though, if the truth must be told, his experience with criminal human nature was not such as to render him over-sanguine in that regard. "Now, apropos of my lady's jewels, Nell," very slowly, "you must have remarked a most peculiar gem among her finger-rings."

"She has so many, you know," suggested Nell, with growing surprise.

"She wore this on the night she drove to my rescue in your company."

"Ah! the one she mostly wears with the setting turned in?"

"Yes; a magnificent opal, seemingly capable of flashing a thousand many-colored fires with every movement, and surrounded by large rubies only less brilliant and dazzling."

Nell's lips began to water and her gloved fingers to work unconsciously.

"Know that ring? Well, I should say I did!" she murmured. "Who could fail to dream of it for a week, after once setting eyes on it? But Mrs. Hardy doesn't wear that every day, and, for some reason or other, never at all within doors."

Then, as the detective maintained a somewhat embarrassed silence, she suddenly burst out with:

"Good Lord, Mr. Grippon! you can't want me to borrow that ring for you?"

#### CHAPTER XXV.

##### NOW FOR MONTALVO!

Now, this was just what had been one of Old Grip's chief objects in seeking that same interview with Boston Nell; but almost instantly the thought occurred to him of the inconsistency of such a step, and, not without a sense of shame, he rescinded his intention on the spot.

He burst into a laugh.

"Bless me, Nell! what could have put such a notion into your head?"

"I don't know," replied the young woman, slowly. "But I'm glad it isn't so. Of course, Mr. Grippon, when you're preachin' honesty to me, for my own sake, no less than in your interest, you couldn't think of asking me to steal a



talismán for you—and I fancy the wonderful opal flasher is something of that sort. Yes, I'm glad of it, and yet—"

Her fingers began to work again.

"And yet what?" asked the detective, a little anxiously.

She flushed shamefacedly.

"And yet, the mere thought of that flasher makes my fingers itch," she went on, falteringly. "The whole overpowering stealing instinct comes back over me with a sort of rush, and it is only the thought of my little boy that keeps me to my foothold."

Perhaps for the first time in his career, Ned Grippon was little short of conscience-smitten. The thought of the heedlessness with which he had been near to undoing his own good intentions with regard to this poor, struggling creature, who was so willing and so earnest to seek her soul's redemption as the price for acting as his confederate and spy, was almost too much for him.

"Think no more of it, Nell," said he, hurriedly. "The gem is, as you say, a sort of talisman, and it may be necessary for me to have it in my possession. In that case, I shall contrive to obtain it of Gladys in my Montalvo impersonation. But do not dream that I would tempt you to obtain it for me surreptitiously. Come now; talk of something else. Tell me of my lady's boudoir life from A to Izzard. In the successful portrayal of my fictitious character, there is no idiosyncrasy of her tigress-like character that I would not be familiar with."

Nell obeyed with alacrity—what more charming occupation than for one pretty woman to enviously pick the foibles of a yet prettier one to pieces?—and the confederates presently separated.

The detective next proceeded to his lodgings, and with the utmost care set about investing himself with his impersonation of the absent Count Montalvo.

In addition to possessing a rare talent for disguises and character-counterfeiting, he had often seen and studied his prototype—a prominent man-about-town when in the city—without being actually acquainted with him, and now there was not a trick of manner or personal appearance, not the slightest trait, that he did not succeed in reproducing in his own individuality. Moreover, he had the count's speech, mostly in broken English, to perfection, while fortunately he was also an adept in the Italian tongue, which might bestead him in an emergency.

Strange to say, he experienced the greatest difficulty in a comparatively trifling item. The real count's hair was long, dark and curling, a romantic mass of clustering masculine ringlets, after the manner of the Fra Diavolo, stage-brigand style; and, in all his stock of make-ups, the detective had but one wig that in any way approximated to the original, and that but imperfectly, with a miserable fit into the bargain, so that it was only by the constant exercise of thoughtfulness that he could keep it from coming awry, perhaps to the exposure of his fraudulentness. This danger, which had been less imminent in his blended rôle of Montalvo with that of Mephistopheles, would now, he felt, be the chief defective joint in his armor, so to speak. However, there was no time to procure a better wig at his costumer's; incessant vigilance must keep guard over the defect, and he had no reason to be dissatisfied when he at last surveyed himself in his mirror in all the glory of his complete make-up.

To the last minutiae it seemed correct—the exact fac-simile of its prototype.

Indeed, as he stepped along the fashionable Fifth avenue promenade, a little later, with that nonchalant saunter which was a well-known characteristic of the Florentine swell, and had aroused the envy of many a stilted dude, he was everywhere and with no little surprise nodded to and greeted as the genuine count. Club fellows grasped his hand and expressed gratified surprise at his unexpected return from Italy. Hopes were hinted that the baccarat and rouge-et-noir that had known him before would speedily resume his distinguished acquaintance. Escapades of a shady nature were even more than hinted at, for the real count had been a sad rake, to draw it mildly. And more than one pretty woman, with more money than reputation, smiled flatteringly at him from her coach or dog-cart.

The pseudo count had only to be guarded in his answers, and to conduct himself with a sort of mysterious taciturnity, for which his eccentric model was distinguished, and all went well.

"This beats the Mephistopheles dodge," thought the detective. "I rather think I'll do."

And he forthwith made a bee-line for the Central Park drives, almost certain that such a fine afternoon would not fail to tempt Gladys to the enjoyment of the crisp, bright air, and the display of one or another of her superb toilettes.

He did not mistake.

At a point on the west drive, not far from the colossal Webster statue, she came sweeping along in her open barouche, solitary in her queenliness, conspicuous amid all the crowded

concourse by the magnificence of her dark beauty, regally caparisoned and signalized by the phantom-like coquetry of that wonderful half-smile that was rapidly making her as much of a *rara avis* in fashionable New York as she had been in London, Paris, and perhaps other of the Old World capitals.

The pseudo count raised his hat with the most elaborate homage, and their eyes met.

He saw the gleam in her proud eyes, the flush in her dark cheek, and then the barouche came to an inviting pause at the edge of the promenade, along which he had been idly strolling.

As he eagerly stepped into the equipage, after raising the fair gloved hand to his lips with foreign gallantry, there was a sort of guttural exclamation, as if of horrified surprise, as the fine bays were again put to their prancing paces, with an ostentatious rattling of the silver-chain trappings.

It was from Richards, seated on the box in his footman's livery, and with such disguise of the detective's handiwork on his physiognomy as a first-class barber had been enabled to effect, and who had suddenly turned a white, scared look upon the man whom he must have honestly regarded as the dead-alive.

But, as a matter of course, his countship had no consciousness, save for the fascinating creature at his side.

"Ah, signorina, this is too much!" murmured the count. "How can I support such happiness? I do not deserve it. I am transported! I ask myself, is this real, is this true? And yet I have kissed your hand, I gaze once more into your divine eyes. And see!"

He drew off his glove and pressed the ring she had given him to his lips, while still returning her enamored glance.

Gladys leaned forward and gave a direction to the coachman, who presently whipped out of the Park and began making for the more secluded drives of the extreme West Side.

"You have then greatly desired to see me again, count?" she murmured, in a guarded voice, while casting down her eyes.

"Desired it!" he also lowered his voice, though without restraining his enthusiasm. "Think of our first meeting (oh, that waltz, that bewildering waltz!) and the hopes that it raised in my Mephistophelian breast, and then imagine the absurdity of such a question. Desired it? I have been desolated—torn with anxiety and suspense!"

"Cruel! and yet you could keep yourself from me for an entire week."

"Ah, madame! fate, not I, was to blame. I have had troubles, embarrassments—but you will one day know all, and you will then forgive."

"I do that already," with an impassioned look. "Are you not with me now? The anguish of the past is as nothing in the rich sunshine of the present and of—possession!"

Her melodious voice thrilled like a harp, chance-swept in the gloom of a dark palace-chamber, with the utterance of these low words.

Her hand was again seized and pressed ecstatically to her companion's lips.

"What! I hear such an avowal from those perfect lips? I am really something to you then? *Corpo di Bacchio!* it is too much!"

"Hush!" and she began to speak in such Italian as was at her command—which was not a great deal; "or let us converse in your own language. That will be better and—safer."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE CARRIAGE INTERVIEW.

"WITH all my heart!" exclaimed the false count, and thenceforth their conversation was carried on less guardedly in Italian. "Ah, madame, how happy you are making me! Tell me, did you get word from the capable young man, Old Grip, of my being at last at liberty to appear in public without fear?"

"Yes; only an hour or two ago. And I returned word for you to him at his office."

"And behold, now by the merest accident I have forestalled you; I am with you! What word did you send, may I ask, divine signorina?"

"I hardly like to tell you, now that we are together." And she again cast down her eyes. "I may have been imprudent—I would almost like to withdraw the message now."

"Withdraw it? Ah, you could not so wish, if it were kindly meant. Tell me, *cara mia*, and once more was the pretty, gloved hand caressed; "was it an appointment?"

"Yes, count."

"For what?"

"For you to visit me, as my special guest, in my own suite, at eight this evening."

For an instant the count was too supremely delectated to utter his acknowledgments, save in incoherent and half-delirious rhapsodies that were doubtless as unintelligible to his companion as to himself.

"Of course, I shall be only too happy," he managed to say at last. "But tell me, is not your husband averse to your receiving gentlemen as your private guests in this manner?"

"Not in the least—that is, he is so no longer. I entertained a party of my step-son's friends till a late hour last night, and my dear, good old husband managed to be content when I so much as ran into his room to give him a good-night kiss and take a look at his gouty foot. My dear good old husband is very complaisant, count."

"I should say he was," said the detective, under his breath, though a self-satisfied grin was his only outward response.

"Of course," Gladys went on, with peculiar composure, "my husband knows that I am a wife to be absolutely trusted, notwithstanding that he is a trifle of forty years my senior. However, it is needless for me to say, count," with a swift glance, "that my step-son will not be present at our interview this evening, save, perhaps, at the outset. I want to have you alone with me."

"Ah, madame! is it that I wake or is it that I dream?"

"My woman, though, will be present, as a matter of course," Gladys made haste to say. "You see, count, with a ravishing smile, "we can begin to grow thoroughly acquainted with each other, at all events. That is," demurely, "if you should offer no objections."

"Objections? Ah, *Dis mio!* I am already the signorina's slave, her dog, her helot her worshiper!"

"Nonsense! or rather, count, let us leave these soft heroics for a fitter occasion. Let us not forget that we are now before the public. There are some matter-of-fact things that I would converse with you about before we again mingle in the more thronged and fashionable drives."

After a number of turnings, they were now slowly traversing an old-time popular but long since comparatively-deserted drive on the west side, above 140th street, and not far from Harlem lane and St. Nicholas avenue. The road had relapsed, in a measure, into its original rusticity. The few and far between cottages at either side, "close-latticed to the brooding day and silent in their dusty vines," wore a hushed, reposeful look. Grass was springing here and there in the roadway that of old echoed to the fast trotter's speeding heels; and the tall trees along the sides, still umbrageous in the rich tintings of their autumnal foliage, were an additional element of seclusion from the busy march of improvement but a few steps away on either side.

"Pray, speak without reserve, signorina," said Gladys's companion, with the utmost suavity. "I am all attention."

"What do you think of the detective?"

"Of the Signor Old Greep?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what to think of him. He sought me out in my retirement at your own instance, dear signorina; or at least, so he said, and I believed him."

"That is true."

"Well, I don't know what to think of him. He stumps me, as they say in your language."

"You mean that you found him somewhat incomprehensible?"

"That is it."

"But do you think him trustworthy—a man whose pledged word and engagement are to be depended on?"

The count shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands.

"Who shall say? Well, then, yes—I shall say yes, though with some diffidence. A man of heart, and a man of iron! Of one thing I am certain."

"What is that?" anxiously.

The count laughed.

"Well," said he, "if I were fleeing for my life, say from the shadow of some crime of which I knew myself guilty, Signor Old Greep is about the last detective in the world that I would like to have on my track. Adorable signorina, that is the way Signor Old Greep impressed me."

"Ah!" She forced a laugh. "Do you know, he impressed me somewhat in the same way. But do you think he is a man who—who might be conciliated?"

"By an enemy, do you mean, dear signorina?"

"Yes; or we will say, by an enemy who wished to be so no longer—who wished for the chance to be fair and upright and blameless in the future."

Again the count shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, I suppose that would depend on circumstances. But really, dear lady, I must not be expected to know anything of value concerning this strange and inscrutable man, who at times looks youthful, and at times seems ancient, who is apparently compounded of silk and iron, of sunshine and gloom—I who have known him so briefly and so transiently. Come, let us talk of something else. Let us talk of something—shall I dare whisper it!—more intimate as between ourselves."

And yet again was the pretty gloved hand imprisoned.

"No, no, count, not yet, not now!" She seemed to abandon the subject with reluctance. "Now for another thing, my dear count. I want you to tell me the nature of your difficul-



ties—why you are compelled to flit into periodical retirement so mysteriously."

Instead of replying, the count merely kissed her hand afresh, and regarded her with an impenetrable look—a sort of maddening taciturnity.

Curiosity, in a general sense, was a weakness that Gladys shared to the full with the least strong-minded of her sex; with regard to this man, the present hero of her imagination, it was a newly-born passion of inquisition, which his reserved manner now inflamed to the highest pitch.

"You do not answer!" she exclaimed, petulantly. "But I might have expected your contemptuous silence in this."

"Not contemptuous, signorina; not contemptuous, on my life!"

"Yes, contemptuous! What am I to be intrusted with the secrets of a man like you? Only a woman—only," in a low, faltering voice, "a woman that loves you!"

And the crimson went over her face in a blinding wave.

The count seized both her hands. He seemed to be restrained solely by a great effort from not only covering them with kisses, but falling on his knees at her feet, then and there.

"Distracting!" he exclaimed. "Oh, my signorina! since you deign to fill me with a new and delirious joy, can you not wait—wait until we know each other sufficiently to exchange those confidences, the betrayal of which to others may mean ruin, perhaps death itself?"

Though with her curiosity unsatisfied, Gladys was not displeased at this outburst. It was a sort of involuntary tribute, or so she thought, to the magnetism of her own fierce and ungovernable emotions. Then, as the significance of the other's words became more distinct to her understanding, she started and turned pale.

"You think, then, count," she murmured, "that, I, too, may have such dreadful confidences in reserve?"

"I am sure of it."

"You frighten me."

"No I don't. Pardon me! but I am certain that you are not one to be frightened by man or devil."

She smiled.

"How, then, would you know me for what your words intimated—an adventurer?"

"By the free masonry of dauntless and unconscionable spirits—the mystic chord by which one desperate heart insensibly thrills to another."

"Are you an adventurer?"

"To the core!"

"No nobleman at all?"

"Only in name; a landless title; the last of a noble and impoverished line!"

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### "AT THE FLASH OF THE RING."

A wilder joy than she could have anticipated from this longed-for second interview with the hero of her imagination took possession of Gladys's soul.

He was one of her own sort—an adventurer, a social free lance, a buccaneer on humanity's pulsing sea, dauntlessly flaunting the black flag of unconscionableness, and at war with the world of virtue, of humdrum law and good order!

She would far sooner have had him such than the genuine descendant of a princely line, with popes and dukes among his ancestors; for she took no belief in his palliating assertion that he was still noble in name and lineage; and, for the matter of filling out the requirements of her savage ideal, she would have even liked him all the better for a bold avowal of having risen, as she herself had done, by the sheer force of vicious talent, from the very dregs.

But, as it stood, she was satisfied, and the detective had shrewdly analyzed her vicious instincts in ministering to them after the manner that we have seen.

"You are sorry—disappointed to learn this of me?" said the fictitious Montalvo, eying his beautiful companion with pretended anxiety.

"Confess it freely, signorina."

"Indeed, I shall not," replied Gladys, flushing. "I like and shall love you the better for it. There is my hand on it, Montalvo—my Montalvo!" And she blushed again.

The detective pounced upon the extended hand with his accustomed lover-like avidity.

"Tell me now," Gladys went on, with a return of her devouring curiosity, "are you alone, or with confederates?"

"Not yet, I cannot tell you yet. Wait! But I am not alone. There is a band, not here, but abroad in my native mountains—a band of spirits as wild, as free, as desperate— But you can know nothing of such things. Patience; when you shall have wholly won my confidence, all will be made clear."

They were still conversing in Italian, and had been from their first interchange in that tongue.

"But I, too, have a band, Montalvo," confessed Gladys, composedly, but not without some pique.

He looked at her incredulously.

"You?"

"Yes, I." She looked about her. "Would you have proof of it?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed politely, as who should say, "Oh, yes! Proofs, of course; but what pretty little masquerade is intending for me?"

Gladys bade the coachman draw up at the roadside.

The detective also recognized the spot. It was where he had given a midnight adieu to this same strange and terrible creature after the memorable scenes in the quarry-chamber.

They descended from the barouche, and, as he gave her his arm, she indicated the way up a gently-sloping green bank among some trees.

Then they passed a quarry, where a lot of ill-looking men, some of whom had evidently just knocked off from their employment, were idling about in the warm shine of the fast declining sun.

"Observe that I have taken off my glove," said Gladys, in a low voice.

"I do observe it," was her companion's seemingly wondering reply.

The men had suddenly come to watch them intently.

"Now observe!"

She turned out the setting of her wonderful opal ring, till then turned inward toward the palm of her hand.

Its stone seemed to drink in the sun's rays, and then dance and dazzle them out again in a hundred rich prismatic gleams, while the encircling rubies sang there about the magic source of these strange reflections like drops of blood shot through with sullen fire.

But the effect upon the ill-looking loungers was even more remarkable than the wonderful properties of the gem itself.

Instantly, metaphorically-speaking, they were at the wearer's feet—mute, spell-bound, subservient, the slaves of the ring.

Something like a fierce pride lighted up the dark beauty of Gladys's face.

"Who are ye?" she asked, imperiously, addressing herself to a powerful, dwarfish man, with a certain authority in his mien, notwithstanding the repulsive brutality of his features and whom the detective easily recognized as the ruffian Bigor.

"The Followers," he replied.

"And what do you rally at?"

"The Flash of the Ring."

She laughed, turned the opal back out of sight, and, resuming her companion's arm, turned away, saying, carelessly, "Rest content, Followers, for the present."

A stone's cast beyond the quarry were some stunted trees and bushes, that masked, to a considerable degree, the entrance of the tunnel—passage out of which Gladys, together with Old Grip (how little did she imagine that he was identical with the man now at her side!) and little Cheese-it, had issued in the darkness of that eventful early morning a week previous.

Into this she now conducted her companion. The interior of the tunnel would have been quite dark, save for some red, level rays of the setting sun that managed to penetrate into it for a considerable distance. By their light, the pretended count now perceived that various heavy bludgeons, crow-bars and other formidable weapons were lying ready for use in rocky shelves running along each side of the rocky passage near the vaulted roof.

Gladys saw him remarking this as she was fitting a key to the door that terminated the passage, which was, perhaps, a hundred and fifty feet in length.

She laughed.

"That is only an outside precaution," said she. "Our real arsenal is within, though one unfamiliar with the interior would not suspect it."

Then they entered the great quarry-chamber, the Lady of the Frozen Smile closing but not locking the door behind her.

As upon the former occasion, an immense fire roared in the rude chimney-place, making the vast picturesque interior as bright as day.

Gladys folded her arms and regarded her companion with a smile, in which no little evil pride was mingled.

"Well, Sir Doubter," she said, "what do you think of your fellow-adventurer by this time?"

The pretended count, in answering, threw into his voice, manner and regard such respect and enthusiasm as could not but satisfy his interlocutor.

"You should have been an Italian, a Sicilian, a free woman of the brigand bands!" he exclaimed. "I am simply astounded! All this, here in New York!"

"Yes."

"But the secrecy of this retreat—how do you manage to preserve it?"

"More easily and simply than you would imagine. The surrounding inclosed lots, together with the adjoining working-quarry, are rented by me—have been under my control almost from the first hour of my arrival in New York. My husband humors my temporary proprietorship of the same as one of my speculative freaks. In the mean time The Followers quarry at the

rock, and hold guard over this fastness—always in my pay. It is simple enough."

"And The Followers themselves?"

"Some of them were once with me in Rome, and thereabouts; or, rather, I was with them. You are an Italian; perhaps you have heard of the Sheepskins of the Campagna, otherwise known, until dispersed and annihilated a few years ago, as the Last of the Carbonari?"

The disguised detective looked at her in unqualified amazement. This terrible woman had gone more deeply into crime and her career had embraced a wider scope of iniquity than even he had credited her with.

"I have, indeed, heard of the dread organization you allude to," he admitted. "So, you were of that band and those fellows at the quarry were some of its members who have since followed you from city to city?"

She nodded, with a proud look.

"Ay, and to remain as much my brave, unthinking instruments here as in the Campagna," she replied. "Oh, my dear count, when one has a dark career in the background, one never knows when friends of that kind may be useful."

"And this underground chamber—is this the only use it serves, as a rendezvous for your desperate minions?"

"No; it might serve me a refuge in my hour of need. Come, I will show you one of its secrets. You see, my adored Montalvo," reproachfully, "I am not afraid to lead in the exchange of confidences."

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### A BANDIT QUEEN IN MODERN NEW YORK.

GLADYS led the pretended Montalvo straight across the floor of the quarry chamber toward the rocky wall directly opposite the great fireplace, before which they had been standing.

As she approached the wall, she must have pressed with her foot a spring-attachment of some sort concealed in the ground, for instantly a small door, cunningly painted in likeness with its surroundings, opened in the rock.

The interior of a luxuriously-appointed chamber, or cell, was revealed.

It was such as an hypocritical anchorite might have secretly provided for himself, therein to forget the painful hours of his fastings and self-imposed hardships when sure that no prying eyes might mark the indulgence.

Gladys stepped into the alcove, followed by her companion, upon whose keen observation we may be sure nothing was being lost.

"It is my retreat, in case of dire necessity," said she, quietly. "What do you think of it, my dear count?"

"Nothing could be better designed as a charming hiding-hole, adorable signorina," he replied. "But you could not remain long immured in even this sumptuous den. There ought to be yet another secret—a secret outlet of escape."

"So there is. The pressure of yet another hidden spring in these walls would open the way to a minor subterranean passage, by which an undreamed-of egress into the open air, more than a quarter of a mile from this spot, would be at one's disposal."

"It seems all but incredible. Adored lady, let me see this secret way; my curiosity is on the razor-edge."

She advanced toward one of the tapestried walls, upon which was hanging a large painting representing Cleopatra's Barge, and raised her hand, but then suddenly hesitated.

"No," said she, turning, with a laugh, "I have shown you enough for one day, at least. No more at present, count."

"Count?"

"Not so. You have already one of the chief secrets of my safety in your possession. You should be satisfied."

He kissed her hand acquiescently, and they withdrew, Gladys noiselessly closing the secret door behind them.

When she turned again to him in the ruddy light of the roaring hearth-fire the mysterious side-smile that gave such originality to her beauty seemed to have something sinister and mocking in its coquettish flickering.

"Well," said she, "have I not trusted you already to an uncommon degree, considering our short acquaintance?"

The pretended count bowed gravely.

"You have, indeed, signorina," he replied. "If the truth must be told, I cannot understand why you have done so."

"It is because I love you, and am quite certain that my passion is returned. Surely," with a dark look, "I can be cheating myself with no illusion in that regard, Montalvo?"

"What! would a doubt of my fidelity, my gratitude be entertained for an instant?"

"Ah, it is well," with a blush. "I do not fear that you would trifle with me, Montalvo. It would cost you too dear."

"What may you mean, signorina?"

"Simply that, if I should merely suspect you of deceiving me, I would stab you to death with no more compunction than if you were a wooden effigy. Ah, you may smile. But, bold and alert as you may be, my poniard-armed revenge would be swift and merciless as the tiger's spring."



"I doubt it not, dear—Gladys," said the other, effusively, "and did not smile in derision of what you said, but rather in wondering admiration of the—well, we will say the rather unique heroism, not to say sanguinariness, of your character."

Nevertheless, the detective, and not for the first time either, thought of the precariousness of his wig, with a fervent hope that it might not by any chance, come awry, and he had, moreover, been secretly uncomfortable almost from the inception of the interview.

It was not that he feared or cared anything for Gladys's threats; he had never yet been sensible to fear in a physical sense. But he was troubled in his moral nature. He had hoped to progress in his impersonation without actually making love to this terrible woman, whose criminal desperateness his soul held in shuddering abhorrence, without actually making love to her. But her own passion had taken the initiative, and here he found himself with some sort of implied reciprocation fairly wrung from him at almost every turn.

However, he vowed to himself that, if Leslie Hardy should be present at the coming interview, as she had said he would be, there he should remain if possible; and he began to hope against hope that the lady of the frozen smile would be content to let the affair proceed more calmly.

She had flushed with pleasure at his addressing her as "dear Gladys."

"Do not think, my beloved count," said she, taking his hand in both her own, "that I could connect you with a threat of vengeance. I feel that it would be scarcely possible."

She raised his hands to her lips, looking him steadily and gravely in the eyes while doing so, and then fell to examining his hand.

"What a sinewy and yet delicate hand you have!" she murmured. "It is as though—What is that simile?—as though the velvet scabbard hid a blade of steel. Is it not so—Mauritius?"

In spite of her beauty, the detective was growing a good deal wearied of all this, but his rôle had to be played, and he, nevertheless, caught her own hand in his.

It chanced to be the one wearing the opal ring, and which she had not yet regloved.

"The hand of strength is as nothing to the hand of beauty," he exclaimed, fondling and examining the pretty member, but more especially the rings that loaded it. "Ah, here is your magic opal. Dearest, would you mind taking it off and letting me inspect it at my leisure?"

"That may not be, Mauritius."

"Why not?"

"Well, I never allow it out of my possession, that is all. You can examine it quite as readily while it remains upon my finger."

"A glorious, a marvelous gem! No wonder you are jealous of its properties. Why, those ruffians out yonder were slaves at its mere scintillation."

"Yes, Mauritius."

"Why is it so?"

"You will know some day. 'At the Flash of the Ring!' It is one of their pass-words."

"And could any other wearer of this ring than yourself exert a similar influence over their fierce spirits?"

"None other will wear it, Mauritius, until after I am dead and cold."

"But imagine the case."

"Well, then, yes. To a certain degree, at least, the alien wearer of the ring could command their services and devotion. They are oath-bound to its flash, so to speak, and it would also be recognized as my signet—as the temporary transmission of my authority."

"But not as against yourself—not to your own undoing, for instance?"

She moved uneasily and her face grew troubled and stern.

"I don't know—I don't wish to think of such a thing!" she exclaimed, almost angrily. "The ring shall never leave my possession for an instant while the last corpse of life courses in my veins. Why do you pursue such an absurd theme?"

An apology, in the profuse foreign style that she seemed to find so charming, appeased her fleeting ill humor.

"I will show you one more instance of my power over The Followers, my dear Montalvo, and then we will go," said Gladys. "It is not alone at the flash of the ring that they assemble."

They were once more standing near the great fire-place. She touched a small knob or button whose metallic presence was just perceptible in the rough-hewn wall.

Whether it was an electric signal communicating with her band or not, it was answered on the instant.

There was a rushing, trampling sound of many feet, and then they were in the room like a pack of wolves obedient to some mysterious summons, their weapons clutched in knotted hands, the ruddy fire-gleams playing fitfully and ruddily upon their savage faces and uncouth forms.

Dark glances were cast upon the pretended count from under a score of beetling brows.

"Mistress, what is it?" growled Bigor, in the husky patois of the shepherds of the Campagna. "Has the sleek stranger dared—"

She interrupted him with a laugh, tossed him a heavy purse for distribution among his comrades and himself, and leisurely took her departure out of the uncanny place on her companion's arm.

A little later Gladys, at "Montalvo's request," set him down at the Mount St. Vincent's Hotel in the Park and went on her way to the sumptuous and honorable home that she so heedlessly desecrated, after receiving a renewal of his promise to be on hand at the appointed hour.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### A VERITABLE PYTHONESS.

It is more than likely that the pretended Count Montalvo was more satisfied with the almost immediately following interview, which duly took place in the magnificent boudoir of Gladys's superb apartment suite, than was the fair Lady of the Frozen Smile herself.

Not only did Leslie Hardy, who was present to help his step-mother "receive" the count, stubbornly disregard all hints to withdraw, but, at the count's own apparently innocent suggestion, Miss Avice was also induced to join the party, which then resolved itself into a social *conversazione* of a somewhat interesting but eminently prosaic character.

Gladys was secretly furious, but there was no help for it for that occasion at least.

Both Johnson and Eleanor Williams, who were out and in as their services were required with the refreshments (Richards prudently kept his battered physiognomy in the background), were not slow to perceive this, and perhaps to tremble for what must follow upon the departure of the guests, for my lady was little less than tigrish when in her desperate moods.

Leslie remained solely out of jealousy, and his sister, having once been introduced upon the scene, though much in opposition to her shrinking inclination, could not avoid studying the progress of the detective's clever and dangerous game with such natural curiosity and interest as can be readily imagined.

As for the detective himself, his course was one of doubled difficulty and delicacy. While he had cause to congratulate himself on the presence of the brother and sister, as rescuing him from the feared if not distasteful endearments, which might otherwise have proved embarrassing, to say the least, Leslie's personal acquaintance with the real Count Montalvo constantly kept his caution and ingenuity at the utmost tension, lest an unguarded word, omission or discrepancy should betray the deception he was practicing.

It was, indeed, with a sense of relief that he at last rose to go at a comparatively early hour.

Gladys managed to throw him covertly a devouring look, but one that had in it also a dangerous glint of exasperation—for somebody.

"I have enjoyed your company, count," said she, sweetly. "You must come again, and soon—that is, if it shouldn't bore you too much."

Bore him! The count was almost indignant, as if at an imputation of his very honor. The evening would remain a red letter in his memory. He would be desolated if not permitted to repeat the treasured visit at his earliest convenience.

"Ah, then you must make no ceremony with me in the future. But you men! what with your clubs and masculine diversions, you so soon forget."

But his countship protested that he should eschew club-life and other masculine diversions for some time to come. He admitted, in fact, with engaging frankness, that unfortunate changes had come upon his fortunes, by which retrenchment was necessarily the order of his day. He would literally have nothing to do but hold himself subject to the Signorina Hardee's commands, and begged to lay his services and devotion at her charming feet forthwith.

Leslie Hardy could not avoid elevating his high-bred eyebrows, which had heretofore been knitted in a half-frown. Count Montalvo—that is, the Count Montalvo of a month or so previous—had not been wont to care a Continental whether his fortunes were temporarily rosy or the reverse. He was the best short-card player in the clubs, and when he was "broke" he gambled, and that was the end of it.

"Come then at your earliest, count," said Gladys, giving her hand, which was at once bowed over and kissed with as much *empressment* as that of an empress. "But you might leave me your address."

The detective named a second-class hotel much affected by Italians and other foreigners, and finished with his address.

As he was making his exit at the main entrance, Boston Nell, who had been deputed to attend him down-stairs, placed a finger across her lips, and then slipped a scrap of paper into his hand.

The detective examined it at his first opportunity, and found these hastily-penciled words:

"She has something even more valuable for you than her wonderful opal ring, if you can but get possession of it. It is her *Diary*. She writes in it almost every day, and I doubt not it would be found to contain the candid self-confession of her entire past life, with all its infamies. But she never parts with the Diary. Indeed, I think she carries it concealed on her person, when out of the house, not even trusting it under lock and key when she cannot personally mount guard over it."

Could the pretended count have cast a glance behind into that luxurious boudoir after quitting it, it might have afforded him a yet further insight into the strangely-complex character of *La Belle Dame Souriante Mystérieuse*.

Avice having said good-night and retired, Leslie lazily arose to follow her example, when Gladys motioned him to remain, while signing her two women to withdraw.

Leslie Hardy was a young man of such inordinate self-conceit as to be in many important respects little less than a fool.

Wholly disregarding of the smoldering resentment in his beautiful step-mother's eyes, he looked up with a gratified smile, even his lingering jealousy of the attractive visitor of the evening vanishing in view of this apparent complacency in his own favor.

"My own, my darling mamma!" he began simpering as soon as the two were alone; "believe me, if I had guessed that you were really in a hurry to get rid of that stupid foreigner—"

The sentence closed in a bewildered exclamation, evolved under the stimulus of a ringing box on the ear.

Nor was this all. She sprung upon him in an access of overpowering fury, clawing at his throat, pounding him in the neck and face with her clinched hands, her eyes blazing like basilisks, her white teeth gnashing together and staring out from between her quivering lips, and her whole form convulsed with demoniac, unrestrained wrath.

"Dolt! fool! idiot! unmitigated and conceited ass!" she started out panting while administering this castigation; "am I never to have pleasurable conversation with a man, but that you must stupidly interfere and foist yourself—your stupid, puerile, asinine self—upon my privacy to spoil all? Wretch, why did you not leave us together when I hinted my wish over and over again? What are you, gilded, perfumed puppet and boy? Think you I pine for duds, for fashion-plates, for under-graduates, when there are men in the world? Milk-sop! if you would still dance and dawdle around my skirts, it shall be as my slave—mark you, solely and only as my slave! Otherwise I will kill you!—There!"

She had released him at last, and, withdrawing a few steps, stood regarding him still resentfully, but with comparative calmness, as of a pythoness that has newly vented its venomous rage, and with the flickering half-smile haunting her lips and face with a deadliness of meaning that was yet another revelation to the astounded and mortified young man.

He, too, had risen, white as a sheet, but with his face bleeding in more places than one where her finger-rings had cut him. There was also something more than terror in his face—something that caused Gladys to secretly regret her insane harshness to the full—a sort of hushed, appalled look, that might mean loathing, detestation, perhaps something worse.

"Thank you!" was all he said.

She pointed to the door, while forcing a couple of tears, that rolled down her cheeks with eloquent penitence—it might not be too late for that.

"Why have you forced this horrible self-betrayal upon me?" she cried. "However, what is done is done."

Poor fool! Even with the marks of her talons upon his face, he threw himself at her feet.

"Not now—you must leave me to myself, Leslie!" she murmured, gently withdrawing the hand that he was pressing to his sobbing lips.

"You will bid your father good-night presently. Say to him that I will give him his sleeping draught with my own hands, as usual, in half an hour."

But it was well (or perhaps ill) for Leslie Hardy that he did not see the look she threw after him as he silently quitted the rooms.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### THICKENING COMPLICATIONS.

"Be sure you come to see me to-night, of all nights! It may prove the hour big with both our fates."

The words were Gladys's, and they were addressed in a low, thrilling tone to Old Grip, still immersed in his Montalvo impersonation, whom she was depositing on the sidewalk not far from the Hotel Brunswick, after a confidential drive in his company as far as the McComb's Dam Bridge.

"You will come without fail, count?"

He lifted his hat and bowed a grateful assent with his usual *empressment*.

Then he stood at the edge of the fashionable thoroughfare, gazing with a stern and troubled face after her splendid equipage until it could no longer be distinguished from the rapidly-moving throng of others, many of them equally as fine and costly.



A whole fortnight had elapsed, his visits to *La Belle Sourciere's* privileged apartments in her indulgent husband's palatial mansion had been frequent, and not a few of them *tête-à-tête*, and it even seemed that Gladys's infatuation had gone on increasing steadily, and yet it appeared to him that he was almost as far from the goal of his counterplotting hopes as at the outset.

The potent opal ring had not yet been intrusted in his keeping, and not even a glimpse had been accorded him into the coveted diary, whose possession in his hands he felt sure, from certain admissions that she had made, would enable him to "call her" with an absolute certainty of success in the deep and desperate game for the mastery which had been running so long and tirelessly between detective and criminal.

"I must make an end, and that speedily," he muttered to himself. "Ring or no ring, diary or no diary, with documentary self-incriminating evidence or without, I can pursue this perilous course of enacting another man's double no longer, or but little longer. It is wearing me out, and perhaps to little actual purpose at that. No, no; to-night must tell the tale as to whether I must still delay, or strike at once and before the iron is half hot."

As he turned a fashionably-clad young man passed him with a supercilious nod, that but thinly veiled a scowl of bitter dislike.

The pretended count returned the salutation with a genuine sense of commiseration, for the young man was none other than Leslie Hardy.

"Poor fool!" thought the disguised detective, as he sauntered down past the Brunswick; "he is having his eyes opened at last with regard to my lady's true nature, and rudely enough. I doubt not that she has uncushioned her claws for his special benefit more than once. But, if he only knew all, he might thank in lieu of execrating me, as I have no doubt he does every hour in the day."

His next encounter was of a more alarming nature.

A well-known club man, rather notorious for his passion for high play, nervously gripped his arm at the next corner.

"Ha, Montalvo, well met!" said this young man, eagerly. "You will not forget that you are to give me my revenge to-night?"

"How is that?" asked the other, trying his best not to appear astonished.

The young man regarded him with mingled suspicion and jocularly.

"What, signor! do you forget our *écarté* in the wee sma' hours of this morning at Rumford's rooms, and the cool thousand you won from me so cleverly? Come, now!"

"Oh, to be sure!" cried the detective, with a laugh. "Of course, I'll be at your service, my boy."

And he hurried away.

"So my fate is upon me at last," he muttered, grimly, "and my prototype, the real count, must have reappeared in his familiar haunts. Courage, Ned Grippon! if ever in your life you were in need of a cool head and steady nerve you will doubtless be called on for the exercise of those qualities within the forthcoming day or two."

His spirits rather rose with the imminence of the new and unexpected emergency than otherwise.

He was entering the gorgeous Hoffman House bar, where he expected to receive word from Cheese-it, when he met Herbert St. John.

The latter, who was in the secret as to the impersonation, cordially grasped the detective's hand.

"Hush!" cautioned the latter; "and let me have a word with you in private, absolutely secure from outside observation."

"What can you mean?" asked the young man, when the necessary seclusion had been secured in one of the private cabinets connected with the main saloon.

"I mean that the man I am counterfeiting, the real Count Montalvo, is again in New York."

St. John gave a look of dismay.

"Are you sure?" he faltered.

"There can be no doubt of it."

"Well," said Herbert, beginning to look at the complication more philosophically, "it's a natural *contretemps* that you have doubtless considered as likely to confront you at almost any time."

"Yes; I have been in a measure prepared for it, even while hoping that better luck would befriend me to the last."

"What's to be done?"

"Nothing—nothing but to keep quiet and try to maintain my impersonation, so far as Gladys is concerned, for two days longer—that is the only extension of time I ask."

"Will that be time enough to bring the ruse to a successful termination with the Frozen Smile?"

"Yes; or if not, I shall drop all masquerade and mummery, and strike my naked blow at the serpent brood."

"I am glad to hear you say that, Mr. Grippon. Of course, it ill-becomes a callow chap like me to venture to criticise an expert like yourself; but I hope you will forgive me for say-

ing that I wish you had done that at the outset, when you first had reasonable proofs of the woman's recent criminality, to say nothing of her past iniquities, instead of going into this elaborate acting and impersonation."

"You don't know all, or you wouldn't say that."

"May I ask you to explain?"

"Certainly. I did not and do not wish to strike my master-blow until sure of such overwhelming documentary evidence against the woman and her confederates as to render it absolutely impossible for her to elude the extreme penalty of the law, for herself and for the others, either through money, influence, or through the glamour of her little less than superhuman beauty."

"What! and do you anticipate obtaining such documentary evidence from Gladys herself?"

"Yes, and within the time I have specified; or, failing in that, I shall pull the jaw-cords of my net off-hand, and without any further attempt at *finesse*."

"Well, now, as to this new peril—the presence of the real Count Montalvo in New York."

"You can help me in this, if you will."

"You have but to command me."

"Good! Inform Miss Avicé, then, of what I have told you as expeditiously as you can."

"She shall know of it within an hour. Then what is she to do?"

"Can't you guess? She is to smooth her brother down with regard to me, whom, of course, he has no doubt as to being the real count. For don't you see that, unless this is accomplished, he may meet, perhaps insult, the genuine Montalvo almost anywhere, when of course my detective game will be dished in the bewilderment and explanations that must ensue?"

St. John nodded and rose.

"Only let Miss Avicé keep Leslie taciturn and undemonstrative for forty-eight hours," continued Old Grip. "It is all I ask."

Herbert again nodded and started to go.

"One moment, St. John. You see, I am nervous about showing myself conspicuously at this hour in such a fashionably public place as this, now that my prototype is in the field. If you chance to note that little imp of mine, Cheese-it, out yonder in the saloon, looking for me, pray send him in here to me, will you?"

St. John took himself off, and a moment later the mouse-colored sprite of the detective's down-town lookout tower duly put in an appearance.

"Any calls at the office this afternoon?" demanded the pretended count.

"Yes, my lord count," was the solemn response, "one. It was a foreign swell who wants you to run down a chap as has been using his name, title and personality to his own advantage."

"Did he leave his card?"

"Yes, guv'nor; and here it is."

The card bore the name:

"COUNT MAURITIUS MONTALVO."

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### MULTUM IN PARVO.

OLD GRIP laughed at first, the situation was assuming such an extraordinarily complicated aspect, and then he knitted his brows.

Surely it was all odd and dramatic enough for the real Montalvo to seek his detective services for the exposure and punishment of a presumptuous bogus Montalvo, who was none other than the detective himself; but the worst of it all lay in the mere fact of the real Montalvo being already aware that there was a bogus Montalvo to deal with.

However, the pretended count smiled softly to himself as he put the indubitable count's card in his pocket.

"Business is business, and false pretenses must be punished," said he, half to himself. "I shall make it a point to see the count to-morrow."

"There was a note from Freezed-Up Smile, too, guv'nor," interposed Cheese-it.

"Where is it?"

"I forgot to bring it, but can tell you what she wrote."

"Ah, indeed? Well?"

"She'll call to-morrow at eleven."

"So! and when will the count come again?"

"At twelve."

Old Grip gave a long, low whistle, such as never escaped except in cases of dire and extreme emergency.

"That will do, Cheese-it. You seem to have been pretty dutiful to-day, and may go to the theater to-night if you wish. Here is a dollar for you."

The boy thankfully received the money, and took himself off with his accustomed preternatural gravity.

Then the pretended count, still with the ever-present dread of meeting his prototype face to face, prepared to slip away on his own account.

The Hoffman bar was just the sort of place where a man like the genuine Count Mauritius Montalvo—a veteran man-about-town, a no-

torious gambler and an incorrigible rake—was liable to put in an appearance at that hour of the day, which was about the middle of the afternoon.

With a view to avoid any such chance meeting, Old Grip slipped out of the cabinet, as he hoped unperceived, crossed the corner of the grand saloon near which it was situated, and, passing through a glass door, succeeded in gaining a corridor of the adjoining hotel.

This corridor, which proved to be wholly deserted, led back through the lavatories and similar offices, and thence, by a long detour, completely encircled the rear of the palatial bar-room (the costliest in America, if not in the whole world), and at last made egress upon Twenty-fourth street, at a considerable distance west of the saloon.

Thinking himself very fortunate at having reached this corridor, after escaping public recognition in the character he was personating, our detective set off at a brisk pace to traverse the passage to its desired outlet, with his eyes fixed upon some repairing paraphernalia, such as ropes, pulleys, a ladder and some scaffolding, which he observed just beyond the lavatory doors, as his primary objective point.

He had not thought, however, that the wash-rooms and their companion accommodations, were in more or less constant use by the patrons of the adjoining bar, no less than by the boarders of the hotel.

It is the unexpected that happens, and he was to pay the penalty of the overweening sense of security he was so carelessly nursing.

He was just coming abreast of the lavatories, when one of the doors opened, and a gentleman stepped unconcernedly out.

But no sooner did the two men clap eyes on each other than they staggered back with a simultaneous exclamation.

The two Montalvos, the genuine and the counterfeit, were face to face.

The former seemed the first to recover himself, at least so far as the voicing of his emotions were concerned, and they were naturally enough of a somewhat indignant nature.

"Miserable, masquerading rascal!" he roared; "so it is you that has been personating me here and there during my absence abroad. Regue! you shall be made to know the ring of the true coin from the base."

He sprang forward to grasp his impudent personator by the collar, but with little knowledge of the manner of man he was to deal with.

The detective promptly knocked him down, and when the true count came to himself, a moment later, he was of very small account indeed.

In other words, it was to find himself securely gagged with his own pocket-handkerchief, besides being bound hand and foot with one of the ropes from the neighboring tackle.

"My dear count, I am sorry for this necessity, sincerely sorry for it," blandly murmured the bogus nobleman, while setting up his helpless prototype in an obscure angle between the wash-rooms and a fire-plug, with as much tender regard for his comfort as could be expected under the decidedly unusual circumstances.

"But, to tell the truth, my dear fellow, it can't be helped. Through no fault of your own, my dear sir, you are considerable of a marplot. You come stalking back unexpectedly from abroad like a ghost to trouble joy. Hence, my dear count, for the time being you must be squelched. Adiozza, count. Be sure to give a full account of this outrage upon your person as soon as you are free. It may draw renewed attention to your robbery of the diamond merchant in McGinnis's gambling-rooms on the eve of your last hurried departure for the sunny skies of your native land, to be sure. But what of that where the ancestral dignity is to be maintained? By-by, count."

Then the detective slipped off upon his fugitive course, and had no sooner reached the open air than he sprang into a *coupé*, and was whirled off toward the distant West Side as fast as a good horse, under the stimulus of a willing whip in the hands of a well-fed Jehu, could cover the ground.

A few hours later, the pretended Montalvo, true to his appointment, was deep in a confidential interview with the woman who had come to love him so madly, so unscrupulously, and perhaps so unaccountably.

They were alone in the boudoir, both of Gladys's women having been sent away.

It was by no means the first of these "sweet stolen interviews" that our detective had been indulged in, and, while none of the proprieties had been transgressed, a confidential, if not wholly lover-like, familiarity had long since sprung up between the pair, but upon this occasion Gladys's manner altogether mystified his companion.

"What is it, my signorina?" exclaimed the pretended count, somewhat impatiently, at last. "You still refuse to let me have the glance in your diary that you have so often promised me. You are equally obdurate in declining to let me wear the opal ring as a proof of your perfect confidence in me. And you continue to talk



idly about everything but the important disclosure that you were to make to me upon this night of all other nights, as you said."

She had, indeed, been somewhat flighty and *distracte*; but she now looked at him with a peculiar smile that seemed to betoken the desired resolution she had been striving for.

"Patience, Mauritius," she said, in a low voice. "I am coming to it."

"Well, then?"

"Mauritius, we love each other very dearly—madly, one might say?"

"Well, my signorina?"

"And yet we have never overstepped the proprieties?"

"Never."

"Mauritius, if I were freed—no longer bound by hateful marriage-ties to an old man, treble my age, and a gouty invalid at that?"

"Well, well?"

"Oh, might we not be happy then, Mauritius?"

"Yes, yes; but you are not so freed, and there's an end of it."

"Not so. I want—"

A wild smile shot over her pale face, for she had grown very pale.

"Well, what do you want, my signorina?"

"Your consent to something."

"To what?"

"I fear your—your nerve, if I should mention it."

"Best try me."

She drew a long breath, then bent over him, and whispered in his ear.

The detective started up, and turned upon her with a look of unmitigated horror.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, huskily; "you would make such a proposition to me? You would murder your trusting and unsuspecting husband by poison, that I might take his place in your terrible arms?"

#### CHAPTER XXXII.

##### DEEPER AND DEEPER.

UPON hearing those awfully accusatory and reproachful words from the man she loved, Gladys sat looking at him for some moments in somber and inscrutable silence.

Then she burst into a low, contemptuous laugh.

"A brave, a most typical adventurer, you, Count Montalvo!" she exclaimed, with a curling lip. "How your old associates, those brigands of the Apennines whose deeds you have so much vaunted to me, how they would rejoice to see their whilom leader turn aghast and tremble like a school-girl passing through a churchyard by night at the mere suggestion of a bold and desperate deed!"

The pretended count had ere this seen the necessity for dissembling and was already recovered of his composure.

"Signorina mia, you ought to make some allowances for me in this instance," he replied, gently, and he even took her hand. "S'death! can you make no allowances for a man being taken absolutely by surprise?"

"Come, now, that is a good deal better, Mauritius!" and she not only recovered her good humor, but actually began to warm up in the interest of her cold-blooded and murderous scheme. "I might have known that you would, naturally enough, be somewhat surprised."

"This is a new notion of yours, signorina."

"No, it is not. I have been entertaining it with more or less distinctness almost ever since I have known you and—since my husband has been nightly receiving his sleeping-potion at my hands. He will accept it from no other hands now, he loves me so well, so trustingly."

And she gave a terrible smile.

Old Grip had long ere this learned to school down the involuntary shudders with which the woman's iniquitous cold-bloodedness had not infrequently inspired him, or he might not now have been able to avoid self-betrayal once more.

"What!" said he; "ever since that first wild waltz of ours at your *bal masque*?"

"Yes, or almost since that hour. My wild, my bewildering passion for you has grown apace, as I think you ought to know, Mauritius."

"I do know it, *cara mia*!"

"It has come to that pass that it consumes me!" she went on, her low voice thrilling into melody, her splendid eyes brightening and softening by turns. "I have been and would be as true as steel to my marriage-ties while they exist. But, nevertheless, I have felt that I must possess you, or die. But why should I die, I with my beauty and my remaining youth, and with the red life boiling in my veins? I, when an old man, already perhaps at death's door, might by being gently assisted over the shadowy threshold so simplify all?"

"What is your proposition in detail?"

She regarded him with a half-suspicious, half-passionate gaze.

"First let me be certain of you, Mauritius," she murmured.

"I don't quite understand."

"First, then, answer me this: Will you marry me if I succeed in—in removing my husband?"

The pretended count drew a long breath.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "If you are permitted to succeed in that, I shall willingly marry you, signorina."

She was too blinded by her passion to note his manner of saying this—she caught only the letter, without the spirit of his words.

"Say no more then, my beloved!" she murmured. "It shall be accomplished!" and she clasped him in her arms.

"Now, as to your plan in detail?" he persisted, a few moments later.

"It is simple enough, my beloved," she went on, sinking her voice to a whisper. "There shall be a last sleeping draught, at my lovely hands, for the dear, trusting, good, rich old man, and he will wake no more."

"What, at one draught?"

"And why not?"

"The detection of poisons is a science nowadays, signorina."

Gladys laughed.

"Not the poison that I would administer, my friend."

"What do you mean?"

"You do not know my early past, Mauritius," ["The deuce I don't!" thought her listener], "or you would not doubt the security of my power, as against science and the world."

"Still, I don't quite understand."

"Listen. My mother was a Gypsy woman, more skilled in herbs and their properties than any of her tribe. I have preserved a preparation that she gave me. It is absolutely unknown to even the vaunted science of our day. A colorless, tasteless liquid, distilled from a hundred secret herbs, three drops of it in a person's drink will cause the sleep that knows no waking. And there is absolutely no trace. It is like the silent yet remorseless footstep of the Destroyer himself, which leaves no print behind."

The detective mastered yet another internal shudder.

"Well, you have explained it, signorina," said he. "All is clear."

"I am glad of that, Mauritius. I would keep nothing back, have no obscurity, in unbosoming myself to you."

"When do you purpose doing this deed, signorina?"

"Now—to-night. Why not?"

He made a hurried gesture of dissent.

"Well, then, whenever you accord me your consent, Mauritius."

"But not before!" eagerly. "Promise me that, on your oath, Gladys!"

"Yes, I promise," reluctantly. "True, I suppose there need be no haste, though," with an under-lidded passionate look, "I confess to a certain impatience in the matter."

"No haste! no haste!" repeated her companion, feverishly. "Swear to me that you will take no step without first receiving my permission!"

"Yes, I swear it."

"Ah, that is well," and he drew a long breath of relief.

She took his hand, looking at him half-moodily, half-playfully.

"You have not my impatience, Mauritius," she sighed.

"Say, rather, that I have more than your prudence, Gladys."

"As you will, then. But give me something to hope on. When is it to be?"

"When is what to be?"

"You are either perverse or stupid. When am I to receive your permission for the deed that is to make us one?"

He looked her in the eyes with one of those calm, cold gazes that had puzzled her before now.

"When I am convinced," he slowly answered, "that you trust me absolutely and without reservation."

"Heavens and earth!" exclaimed Gladys; "are you not convinced of that by this time?"

"No."

"What will further convince you of it?"

"The possession of and perusal of your diary."

Gladys made a half-furious gesture.

"That again, and that always!" she exclaimed, hoarsely.

"Yes, always. But did not I say that you would not trust me?"

"Nonsense! Why should you be so mad to read my diary?"

"I don't know. I can no more account for the desire than you can account for having written. It is a craze, a mystery!"

"It is that," said Gladys, thoughtfully. "Indeed, I have often wondered what impelled me to take up that diary. The impulse came upon me years ago, and has grown. Strange! It contains the detailed confession of crimes that would send me to the scaffold over and over again, besides handing down my name as a by-word of infamy for future time. And yet I find myself still continuing it, still enlarging and even philosophizing upon the fearful record, day by day, impelled thereto by a prompting force that is irresistible. It is unaccountable, it is even frightful! I can no more understand it now than ever before."

"There is no accounting for it," observed her

companion. "It is an enigma in criminality as old as crime itself."

"I believe you, Mauritius."

"By that same sign, you can understand my craving to peruse the self-incriminating confessions of your bold and fearless soul, *cara mia*."

"I should hate to let the diary out of my hands for an instant, even to pass into yours," she said, after a long pause. "I have a foreboding. Utterly as I trust you, I should fear that ill-fortune would come to me as a consequence."

"But why?"

"I cannot tell you, because I do not know. I only feel it!"

She shivered slightly, and drew a light lace wrap, which she was wearing, yet more closely about her form, notwithstanding that the boudoir atmosphere was warm, with a cheerful coal fire sparkling behind the silver-mounted bars of the grate.

Her companion made a gesture, half-scornful, half-impatient.

"Forebodings are for fools!" he jeered. "You simply do not trust me, and that is all there is of it."

#### CHAPTER XXXIII.

##### THE DETECTIVE IN HIS DEN.

GLADYS looked at him reproachfully, with a quivering lip.

"You wrong me bitterly when you say that, Mauritius."

"I really do not see how I do, signorina," said the pretended Montalvo, earnestly. "Here you calmly propose to make me privy to a murder. Am I shocked unnaturally, or do I back out? By no means. I promise compliance, on the simple condition that I may take your diary in my keeping, to read it at my leisure. And lo! you shrink back as if it were of more vital importance than the seven books that the Sibyl laid before the Roman kings."

She still dwelt upon him with her troubled gaze.

"And what of my premonitions?" she murmured. "What of my inner warnings, my forebodings of ill to come of the granting of your request?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Please don't!" he jeered again, with an air of weariness. "Like ring, like diary! You won't trust me, and there is an end."

She made a half-despairing gesture, as of exhaustion or giving in.

"I will think over it," she said.

He arose, and prepared to take his leave.

"Stay Mauritius," she pleaded.

"But what for?"

"Wait." She arose, putting her arms around him. "Kiss me."

As he did so she whispered:

"Come to-morrow afternoon. We will drive if it is pleasant, remain here should it storm. I think I will give it to you then."

"Peste! you think you will?"

"Wait—don't go quite yet. Here—here is a token that you may like as a brief loan! Don't think that I wouldn't trust you with the diary if my fears would let me. Embrace me—hold me tight! There; kiss me again, and then good-night."

Something had been slipped on his finger. He caused it to flash in the light of the first street-lamp that he passed under after quitting Gladys's presence. It was the summoning ring, the wonderful opal!

Old Grip's first thought upon waking on the following morning was of his adventure with the real Montalvo, and he called for all the morning newspapers even before getting out of bed.

But a careful scanning of their contents failed to reveal anything of the affair in print.

"Aha! my parting warning was not thrown away upon the precious black-leg!" he thought, and straightway began to dress himself with a feeling of relief. "What a capital thing it is to have some of the antecedents of these gentry at one's finger-ends!"

It was also a sensation of relief to be able to discard his elaborate Montalvo make-up in making his toilet, if only for a part of the day.

However, a fresh thought of alarm occurred to him before he had quite finished dressing.

He had intended to tell Gladys that he had seen the detective, and received from him an intimation that her contemplated visit to the down-town office must be deferred.

Horror! This he had forgotten to do, and now she would be due there at eleven, while the count had promised to put in his appearance at twelve.

If the two should meet!

But this was a contingency that he wouldn't even consider. It must be prevented at all hazards and every risk.

Hastily bolting his breakfast, which seldom amounted to more than a cup of coffee and a roll, with perhaps an egg or two, he hurried down-town.

It was after half-past ten when he entered his den.

"Any call as yet?"

"No, sir."

"Anything else?"



"Yes, sir."  
"What?"

Cheese-it, who had made his appearance from his adjoining lair, or lookout, with a sort of apologetic air, was in the act of discussing a late breakfast, which he carried in his hand. It consisted of an enormous chunk of bread-and-cheese, while the nozzle of a bottle of beer peeped suspiciously from one of his trousers pockets, which its stubborn bulk bulged out ridiculously.

"The Freezed-up Smile's footman was a key-holin' the door again, sir," he made out to answer with his mouth half full.

"When?"

"Ten minutes ago."

The detective knitted his brows while putting his desk to rights.

"So!" he thought. "Has Romany Ralph so soon forgotten his last lesson from me, or cannot Gladys find it in her prudence to visit me without sending her *avant courier* to report as to the lay of the land?"

He whistled softly to himself, and then turned his glance inquiringly upon his attendant sprite.

"A late breakfast, eh?"

"Yes, guv'nor," admitted Cheese-it, still apologetically, but not hesitating to take a pull at his beer-bottle, after which he wiped his lips with solemn complacency. "But a feller can't help feeling sort of rocky after making something of a night of it—with your Majesty's permission."

"Minstrels?"

"No, sir," with sovereign contempt. "The theater."

"Cheese-it," said the detective, impressively, after a reflective pause, "her ladyship comes at eleven, the count at twelve."

"Yes, sir."

"Under no circumstances must they meet."

"No, sir! it would never do."

"I am glad that you appreciate that so well."

"Mr. Grippon, I'm yours till death."

"I believe it. Well, you must help me out in case of a threatened emergency, and keep your eyes open."

"Are they ever shut, guv'nor, when they ought to be peeled?"

"Not often, I grant you. Begone now; there is the rustle of a silken skirt on the stair."

Gladys entered the office as the boy disappeared into his den.

Old Grip received her with his accustomed urbanity, setting out his best chair.

"You are somewhat of a stranger," he said, politely.

Vigorous in her robust, statuesque beauty, she had gracefully subsided into the seat, to the best display of her rich costume; and as, with a grave inclination of her queenly head, she had fixed her magnificent dark eyes—perfect wells of mysterious limpidity they appeared to-day—rather searchingly upon his face, he thought he had never seen the unconscious coquetry of her characteristic smile light up her strange loveliness to a more unique and eerie advantage. There seemed positively something preternatural in it. But, then, the same feeling had come over him again and again so many times before!

"Yes," she murmured. "Indeed, it has more than once occurred to me, Mr. Grippon, that you might have called upon me."

He elevated his eyebrows.

"Pardon me, but to what end?"

"Oh, I don't know!" and then she gave her low, musical laugh.

The detective hesitated.

"I would not have you suppose that I have forgotten your personal service at our last meeting," he said, flushing.

"You mustn't speak of that," with an honestly dismissive gesture. "The indebtedness, if any, was liquidated, as you ought to know."

"Thank you, ma'am. You are, then, by this time, I suppose, in the full enjoyment of—your desired friend's society?"

She smiled sweetly.

"Yes, thanks to you. I find Count Montalvo all I could wish—that is, almost all I could wish. We search in vain for absolute perfection in this world, Mr. Grippon."

"So, she is making reservations already," thought the detective to himself; but he only put on a somewhat surprised and questioning look.

"You are perhaps busy," she said. "I am perhaps taking up valuable time?"

"I can readily spare you a few more minutes, ma'am."

"In view of the fact that you have faithfully performed the work that you were good enough to undertake in my behalf, you doubtless wonder at the motive of my visit to day?"

"I do not deny it, ma'am."

She suddenly threw the *convenances* to the winds, and turned to him with a reckless passionateness of appeal in her looks, that might have softened any other heart but the detective's, which knew and judged her so well.

"I have been good of late—good, virtuous, dutiful and struggling!" she exclaimed. "True,

I have made a friend and escort of the count, but that is all; and at the same time I have been circumspect of conduct, wifely and dutiful to my suffering husband, who is so good and indulgent to me—and also as kind and amiable to Avice as I have known how."

Though secretly appalled at the woman's duplicity, the detective merely elevated his eyebrows, as much as to say:

"And what on earth is all this to me?"

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### THE REAL COUNT AND THE FALSE.

BUT Gladys, if a monster, was the strangest compound of humanity that ever walked upon two feet.

It was quite evident that, for the time being at least, she was so earnest in her hypocrisy as scarcely to be aware of it.

"This is the truth that I have been telling you, Old Grip," she went on, almost wildly. "I thought you ought to know of it—I couldn't rest till I had impressed it upon you—all my struggles to be a better woman, to fill my place honorably, to redeem my past!"

"But why ought I to know of it?"

Even the involuntary smile was almost gone out of her face, so terrible was her earnestness. She made an impulsive movement and then stopped, trembling, as if only restraining by a great effort a mad prompting to fling herself at his feet.

"Oh, do not continue to hunt me down!" she cried, desperately. "Call off Avice—call off the bloodhounds of your own inexorableness! I'll subscribe to what conditions you will, I'll humiliate myself as you command, I'll go down on my knees to you! Only don't hunt me down any longer—don't do it, don't!"

There was no acting here—she believed in the self-deception of the moment, if in nothing else. The detective saw this, and yet he was unmoved, save as to the strange and new psychological problem that she was unconsciously offering to his inspection.

He looked at his watch and saw that it was half-past eleven.

It seemed a singularly cold-blooded action, in view of the emotional frenzy she had just exhibited.

She gave a little shiver, as if withdrawing into herself, and she was deathly pale.

"Don't think me altogether heartless and cold-blooded, ma'am," said Old Grip, calmly. "Before I answer you, tell me how matters are in the Hardy household."

She seemed surprised, but at the same time to catch at his words as if at a floating straw of hope.

"I should have thought Avice would have kept you informed," she said.

"I have seldom seen or conferred with Miss Hardy of late," returned the detective, and it was the truth.

Her face began to light up again.

"Affairs are well at the house," she went on, somewhat eagerly, "except perhaps in the case of my husband."

"Mr. Hardy's gouty attacks do not abate, then?"

"I fear it is something more serious than that with my good husband."

"Do the doctors say so?"

"No; and that is the worst of it. I fear they do not understand his case—that there may be graver troubles than they suspect."

"Indeed!" he was beginning to heed her new and hideous drift and was not averse to leading her on; "but this is somewhat alarming. What may you suspect, ma'am?"

"Heart trouble," with assumed reluctance.

"Ah!"

"I only can have any knowledge of this, because it is only I that sees my husband during his sleep."

"His sleep?"

"Yes. It is his habit to take a sleeping draught nightly, by reason of the pain he suffers from his gouty foot, which would else make slumber impossible. It is my custom to give him the draught with my own hands; in fact, he will take it from none others."

"Yes."

He was observing her with a somewhat frowning intentness that she could not understand, and yet could not take alarm at; as, indeed, how could she, not suspecting the net that was being spread for her?

"After administering the composing draught, I often watch my husband's sleep," she went on, with finely-acted earnestness. "Ah! if he should die—die unexpectedly—what would become of me?"

"Die, and unexpectedly?"

"Alas, yes! If you could but note his breathing at such times, and mark the labored throbbing of his heart!"

The detective was himself breathing hard by this time, and through his clinched teeth.

"It is something awful!" she went on, not noting. "I have given his physician the hint, but with no result. He only smiles. Oh! if I should go to my poor dear husband's room some morning only to find him lifeless in his bed—"

"WOMAN!"

The detective could bear no more. He had

sprung to his feet, with his hands clinched, his face purple, his entire mien expressive of his unrestrainable rage, indignation and disgust. In spite of her superhuman beauty, he could almost have stricken her down, and pinned her to the floor, like a wild beast, then and there.

She regarded him with such astonishment and alarm as can be readily accounted for from the hide-and-seek circumstances of the situation.

In believing herself to be cunningly paving the way for the fresh atrocity she was holding in contemplation, Gladys, as a matter of course, could have no inkling of the inside information as to her hideous plans of the man to whom she had been speaking.

Old Grip saw the mistake he was making in thus giving way to his righteous indignation.

With an apologetic gesture, he sunk back into his seat, and buried his face in his hands.

When he looked up again, he was once more composed.

"You must overlook my strange violence, ma'am," he said. "I—I was doubtless thinking of something else."

He again consulted his watch. Ten minutes to twelve! He rose abruptly to terminate the interview, and she accepted the hint.

"With regard to that matter upon which you supplicated me, ma'am," he added, as she looked entreatingly back at him, with her hand on the door, "I can now say this much: I will confer on the subject with my client, Miss Avice Hardy, at my very earliest opportunity."

"Yes! yes!"

"And should she be willing to let up on you, I shall not say or advise aught to the contrary."

Her face lighted up, and she was about to pour forth her acknowledgments, when he almost thrust her through the door.

It was only when he heard her rustling descent of the stairs that he drew a breath of something like relief.

"Here, Cheese-it!" he cried. "Quick!" as the boy appeared; "brush and air the chair in which that creature sat. Pahl! As God is my witness, I renounce any compunction for the systematic deception I have been practicing upon her, to her downfall and dismay! Any weapon, any means of warfare, is as justifiable in hostility with such contaminating fiends in human form as when waged against a poisonous cobra or a rabid dog!"

Then, watch in hand, he was at the window overlooking the street.

Only three minutes lacking to twelve! but Gladys is already in her coach, and being driven slowly away.

There! she is already half-lost amid the whirling press of Broadway. Scant time, too, for here is Count Montalvo making his way along the street from the opposite direction.

What a narrow chance! Another minute's lingering on the part of her ladyship, and they must have met.

But what is this? Richards, the spy, has marked the count's coming, and is off, after his mistress's carriage, to carry her the news.

"Here, Cheese-it, quick!"

"Yes, guv'nor."

"The count is coming up, and Richards is off with the intelligence to the Frozen Smile. Begone! Should she return, do, think, act, invent what lies and threats you please, but don't let her get out of her carriage again, on your life!"

"Thorough's the word, boss!" and the lad was up and away like a flash.

When Count Montalvo entered, a moment later, the detective was apparently preoccupied at his desk, but with ever a prudent weather-eye upon the street below.

A handsome man, but a rake, a gambler, an unconscionable adventurer, and an easy-mannered, accomplished man-of-the-world withal. Such was the result of Grippon's leisurely judgment of his prototype, as he suavely motioned him to a seat.

"I did better for you than you ever did for yourself, old fellow," the detective could not help mentally soliloquizing, as he marked the selfish, somewhat swaggering manner of the man betraying itself through his worn veneering of aristocratic pretension. "I gave the world at least a gentlemanly outside for your benefit."

"Mr. Greepon, the detective, I presume?" said the count, exhaling a strong smell of brandy and soda as he ostentatiously subsided into the chair, but lighting a fresh cigar for all that.

"Exactly. Count Montalvo, I suppose? Sorry I wasn't in when you called yesterday. What can I do for you?"

"Sir, it is I, Count Mauritius Montalvo, the last descendant of one of the oldest and most princely houses in Europe, who seek your valuable services against a scoundrelism, an imposition, an iniquitousness."

"Exactly. Stick to the point, please. Watch stolen! Fleeced at bunco? Netted in a faro hell? Anything of this sort?"

"No, sir!" very grandly; "not one of these infamies that you are so kind and condescending to mention—not one."

"Ah, indeed!—Hullo!" this to himself, with



his glance in the street; "so her ladyship is back again! But, Cheese-it is on hand, and he won't let her get out of the coach, I'm sure he won't— Ah, yes, sir; just as you say," aloud, and with his divided attention once more perfunctorily upon his visitor. "Those bunco chaps are the very devil on a dead skin. I once knew a man, one of your countrymen, too—a soap-and-tallow man from back in Connecticut— By Jupiter!" once more *sotto voce*, with his glance on the sidewalk; "she's coming out in spite of him. No she isn't. Brave boy! my own Cheese-it! He fairly forces her back, even against her protestations. And now, she is actually off again, and for good. Saved! saved! What, count!" sinking back with a perspiring brow but a disburdened mind; "it wasn't bunco, then, but faro, eh? Sad dogs, those gutter-sharks, but I've got 'em at my fingers' ends. But the deuce! was it your ticker that was lifted, after all?"

"No, sir!" thundered the count, red in the face, and indeterminate as to whether the detective had taken leave of his senses or not; "as I said before, it was none of these cheap, vulgar infamies. Have I come here to be insulted, sir?"

"Really, my dear fellow, I trust not, or you must go away without getting what you came for. By the way, what is your grievance, count?"

"A man, a scoundrel, sir, has been impersonating me!"

"Oh! why the deuce didn't you say that in the first place?"

#### CHAPTER XXXV.

##### CHEESE-IT SHOWS HIS ZEAL.

CHEESE-IT had just returned from his triumphant mission in the street below, and slipped off to his den after receiving an approving nod from his master.

Once fairly launched on the subject of his grievance, Count Montalvo proceeded under a full head of canvas, with every stitch drawing.

It did not take a great while for Old Grip to hear the story with whose substance, of course, none could be more thoroughly familiar than himself, though, to be sure, it was greatly enlarged upon by the narrator's imagination, the whole being topped off by his account of the crowning outrage of the preceding afternoon, in which, it is needless to say, the scion of Florentine nobility sacrificed nothing of his *amour propre* in the telling.

Indeed, with regard to this encounter, the count's relation was not unsuggestive of Falstaff and his men in buckram.

"Pretty tough, my dear count, pretty tough!" was the detective's sympathizing comment when the windy tale was concluded. "And you met the fellow face to face at last? But I don't see how he overcame you so easily."

"Easily, sir!" repeated the only original Montalvo, indignantly. "And pray what would you or any man have done, sir, when taken wholly by surprise, with the muzzle of a cocked revolver thrust between your teeth and a bloodthirsty bowie-knife tickling you in the ribs?"

"Oh! ah! I had forgotten. Still, to be ignominiously bound hand and foot, gagged, and set up in a corner, like a scare-crow or an inviolable tobacconist's shop-door emblem!"

The count waved his hand majestically.

"Do you take into account, sir," said he, gravely, "the fact of my having succumbed to an apoplectic fit at the critical moment, and of my cowardly double having taken advantage of the infirmity—which is, unfortunately, hereditary in my princely family, sir?"

"The deuce! how stupid of me not to have thought of that. But through what means did you manage to become extricated from this painful situation?"

"Through the timely intervention, sir," with another lordly gesture, "of the hotel boot-black, with the assistance of a sympathetic scrub-woman."

"Bad, bad! It's a wonder to me you didn't publish the outrage. Hardly a newspaper reporter in town but would have given his week's beer money for the particulars."

The last of the Montalvos threw away his cigar, and hemmed and hawed.

"Sir," said he, with superlative grandeur, at last, "a Montalvo depends not upon a slavish and vulgar newspaper publicity for the righting of his wrongs. They touch his honor, which is his more than life, sir," and the count pressed the point of his finger against his waistcoat till the member fairly bent like a bow. "He takes the law in his own hands."

"But in that case, my dear count, why do you come to me?"

"To secure identification of the wretch who has been personating me, sir, as a matter of course."

"Ah, I see! merely that you may know him, that he may be delivered up to such chastisement as you may devise?"

"Precisely, sir."

"Good! I shall cause him to confront you,

with a confession of his wrong-doing, within forty-eight hours, if you wish me to undertake the job."

"Splendid! grandissimo! I do wish you to undertake it, sir. I commission you to do so forthwith."

"Fifty dollars, please."

The last of the Montalvos looked at him with mingled surprise and distrust.

"Is that your fee, sir?"

"Yes—as a starter."

"And is it your custom to demand advance payment for your services?"

"It is."

"I could doubtless find detectives who would undertake this business for half the price you name."

"I can direct you to those who would undertake it for fifty cents, and then sell you out for what they could get. Good-day, sir; and the devil fly away with you for consuming my time to no purpose!"

The count laughed, shrugged his shoulders, reflected, paid the money, took a receipt and disappeared.

"Not half a bad fellow, if he weren't three parts drunk from last night's racket," commented Grippon, philosophically. "Cheese-it!"

The boy appeared.

"You did exceptionally well with her ladyship. Tell me about it."

"She was sure the count was up here, guv'nor, insisted on following him up, and at first wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Well?"

"I admitted the soft impeachment, sir, and tried to persuade her that you an' the count would fire her out of the winder fur her pains."

"Did that go down?"

"Not much."

"She still insisted on coming up?"

"Yes."

"What did you do then?"

"Threatened to call the perlice an' have her rested as an improper person."

Old Grip laughed in spite of himself.

"Well, and she at that?"

"Kicked like a steer."

"Still insisted on getting out of her coach, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you manage at last?"

"Butted her full in the *sto-mack* and swore I'd have the law on her in five minutes."

"Well, and the end of it?"

"She was clean out of wind as she drove away, boss, an' called me a dirty, insolent little cub, but it struck me that she was sort of laughing all the same."

"Here's five dollars for you."

Little Mouse-color pocketed the gift with one of his most sepulchral grins.

"I shouldn't wonder if I might take in another teeyater," he murmured, in a gentle, self-communing tone.

"Not to-night, my boy. I want you to stand by me fast from this hour on. I have an indefinable feeling that I may need you—that there's trouble, perhaps danger, in store for me."

"Boss, count on your own little Cheese-it while there's a live hair in his head, a last tooth to bite with, or a foot to jump at your bidding."

"All right, my boy. Betake yourself at once to the neighborhood of the Hardy mansion, note everything, and, in lieu of more definite instructions from me, exercise your own judgment."

Cheese-it hurried away without a word, while Old Grip locked his office door for the purpose of proceeding to his room to make up (for the last time, he hoped), for his Montalvo personation, pending his promised afternoon visit upon the Lady of the Frozen Smile.

Before quitting the building, however, he took from his waistcoat pocket the wonderful opal ring (which, of course, he had not worn on his finger when not *en costume*, as you might say), and caused it to scintillate its glorious prismatic hues beneath his eyes.

"What impulse causes me to thus examine you now, oh, wonder of strange gems!" he muttered to himself, apostrophizing the stone. "I do so suddenly and without premeditation, and yet as though impelled by a mysterious, occult prompting. Is it that you are, perhaps, ere long to be my guide and monitor through dangers greater and more imminent than I have yet encountered in the pursuit of this strangely terrible woman to her deserved doom? Who knows? who knows?"

He once more secreted the gem, and hurried away.

Upon reaching the open air, he remarked to his satisfaction that the weather had turned off cold and threatening.

This would, doubtless, necessitate the coming interview to take place in-doors, instead of during another drive with Gladys, and this, for some reason that he could not explain to himself, was much preferable to his inclination.

On his way up-town, he was so fortunate as to meet Avie Hardy in an Elevated car.

She was with her friend, Miss St. John, on a shopping expedition.

"I received your news at the hands of Her-

bert," the young lady hastened to say as soon as they could converse freely. "Then this morning I had the chance of talking with my brother."

"With what result?" inquired the detective, with unconcealed eagerness.

Avie's troubled look was reflected by Miss St. John, who, as being in confidential relations, was listening with intense interest.

"Not with the most flattering result, I am bound to say," she replied.

"Please explain."

"I am afraid Leslie has been carousing and gambling over night, and in this man's very company," she said, reluctantly.

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### TROUBLE AHEAD.

OLD GRIP received this piece of information, which might well have been deemed startling, with more equanimity than either of his fair companions could have anticipated.

"Of course, you mean in Count Montalvo's company?" he said.

Avie bowed her head.

"Well, that is not so bad for us," continued the detective. "It shows, at all events, that Leslie will no longer show himself so inimical to me in my personation of the count's character, which I hope to assume to-day for the very last time."

"You mistake, Mr. Grippon," said Miss Hardy, with increased gravity. "There is a possibility for confusion and embarrassment, at least, from what my brother told me."

"I beg that you will speak altogether without reservation, Miss Avie."

"I was beginning to tell Leslie how I hoped he would, at least, control in the future all outward manifestations of aversion for Count Montalvo during the latter's visits upon Gladys, when he suddenly interrupted me by saying:

"Ob, that is all right, sis! The count and I have made up our differences. I was with him at the club and elsewhere the greater part of last night and this morning, and he's a pretty jolly good fellow, after all."

"Oh!"

"There is yet worse to come," Miss Hardy went on.

"Do you know, sis," Leslie went on, "there's the oddest thing in the world about the count."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Why," he replied, "when I occasionally alluded, as jocularly as I could, to his devotion and frequent visits *en cavaliere servante* to our adorable step-mamma, he made no answer, but looked at me rather stupidly as if he didn't know what I was talking about."

The detective drew a long breath, and gazed at the speaker with the intensest interest.

"Of course I was greatly alarmed at all this," continued Avie, "for I saw at once that it was the real count Leslie had been in company with, and I feared that the exposure of your impersonation of the character must be at hand; but, fortunately, it hadn't come quite to that pass yet."

"Go on, please. Leslie did not say, I hope, that the count denied point-blank the associations he suggested?"

"Oh, no; that is the most fortunate part of it. Leslie said that at last the count merely laughed and shrugged his shoulders, with a sly and intelligent look. After that the subject was not alluded to again, even in jest."

"You mistake, Miss Hardy," said the detective, reflectively. "That is the most unfortunate part of it."

"In what way?" demanded Avie, anxiously.

"I have just had a conference, in my professional capacity, with my prototype, the real Count Montalvo. He is a cunning and unprincipled rogue, besides being endowed with no mean intelligence."

"Well?"

"Well, he is perfectly aware of his precious character having been freely pirated, so to speak, during his absence abroad. Then the mere fact of his having made no denial of Leslie's insinuations shows conclusively that he at once took in the real state of the situation."

"What? guessed, you mean, that it was the doings of his counterfeit that Leslie was alluding to?"

"Precisely."

"But why would he not then make an exposure of the fraud forthwith?"

"He was too deep for that. He doubtless thought it cleverer to bide his time, and perhaps take advantage of the very opportunities that his counterfeit in my person had created."

"Heavens! take your place, you mean? Call on Gladys in your stead?"

"It were possible. My make-up is a faithful copy of the original. Gladys would not discover the substitution immediately."

"No; but she would discover it sooner or later, and then?"

The detective smiled.

"Then it might be pretty bad for me. Her ladyship, as you know, is about the last person in the world to be lightly trifled with."

Avie clasped her hands, while Miss St. John looked frightened.

"Even as it is, then," said Miss Hardy,



"there is danger of a ruinous *contretemps* at almost any hour."

"It's no use disguising the matter, Miss Avic—there is."

"What is to be done?"

"Only to trust that our fortunate star will befriend us twenty-four hours longer."

"What—is that all you ask?"

"Yes; in an hour's time I shall once more be invested in my fictitious personation, and I am determined, as I said, that it shall be for the last time."

"And Gladys?"

"If the adverse fates hold off, her diary will be in my hands to-day. I have her solemn promise to that effect."

"And then?"

"Then there is an end of intrigue and disguise, and the blow falls."

"But without the diary?"

"Then it must still fall, though perhaps with less sureness of effect."

"You saw Gladys last night in your assumed character, did you not?"

"Yes; and three hours ago in my own character."

"What?"

"There is no time to tell you of her visit now. But be of good heart meantime. One way or another, the end is close at hand."

Here the detective's destination was reached, and, touching his hat to the young ladies, he quitted the cars.

It was snowing an hour or two later—the first snow of the season—when Old Grip, as Count Montalvo, presented himself to the Lady of the Frozen Smile.

She received him in her boudoir, as usual, where her women, Johnson and Eleanor Williams, who had evidently been dressing their mistress's hair, gave certain indications that she was not in the most enviable of tempers.

Indeed, as the pretended count made his obeisance to the queen of the boudoir, and seated himself with his accustomed air of easy assurance, it struck him that Johnson, *alias* Mincing Meg, was throwing an occasional suspicious glance at him, while Eleanor seemed uneasy and fitful in her movements about the rooms.

"What's up?" he thought. "Are there hints of the unwelcome truth in the air, and must I already be on the alert for my lady's jeweled dagger?"

But his first few words with Gladys convinced him that his apprehensions were premature.

She was a little abrupt at first, but thawed perceptibly as he softly pressed her hand in both his own while raising it to his lips.

However, Johnson and Nell were in and out of the room more than he liked, or could well account for, and once or twice there was also a suggestion of "Richards" being not far distant.

"How do you relish wearing the opal?" asked Gladys, taking his hand to observe the ring when they had settled themselves into their accustomed confidential attitudes.

"It likes me well, signorina, as Hamlet remarked of his fencing foil."

"When are you going to give it back to me?"

He was puzzled by her manner, which was nervous and uncertain, but held his peace.

"Oh, whenever you choose, I suppose," he replied, with a smile, "though I trust you are in no hurry for the bauble's return?"

"Not in a very great hurry."

He began to show some temper of his own.

"Are you afraid I will pawn it?" he asked, half angrily. "What has come over you, signorina?"

As she did not answer, but only looked at him moodily, with the phantom smile playing an eerie sort of shadow-dance at the corner of her lips, he coolly arose, and, with a sarcastic bow, turned to take his leave.

She sprang after him instantly, clutching his arm with a species of fierceness.

"What do you mean, Mauritius? You would not surely leave me thus? You shall not!"

"Excuse me," coldly, "but I anticipated a private interview."

"We are alone."

"At present, yes. Perhaps your tiring-women have wearied of intruding themselves for a minute or two. They are considerate."

"They shall not interrupt us again, Mauritius."

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently, while permitting her to convoy him back to his seat at her side.

She was about to speak again when he forestalled her.

"Have you got the Diary for me, as you promised?" he demanded, abruptly.

"It is in my bosom, Mauritius," she replied, instantly softening in proportion as he hardened.

"You know what I am here for. Why don't you give it to me?"

"All in good time, Mauritius," she murmured, soothingly. "You are only just come, remember."

Gently, but firmly, he held her at arm's-length from him, and gazed searchingly, almost sternly, into her eyes.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### A LAST CARD, AND YET NOT TRUMPS.

"WHAT is it, signorina?" demanded the detective. "What has happened?"

The beautiful dark face was immovable under his stern scrutiny, but she did not make the mistake of attempting any evasion with him.

"I begin to distrust you," she replied.

"Distrust me?"

"Yes, Mauritius."

"Why?"

"You visited Old Grip, the dreaded detective, at his office, to-day—thinking to do so without my knowledge."

He made a disdainful gesture.

"Are you going to let me have your diary, or not?"

"I have also seen Leslie. You were with him among the drinking and gambling saloons last night and later."

"Once more, are you going to keep your promise as to the diary, or are you not?"

"Perhaps so; when I am sure that I can trust you."

Then a sort of terror came into her face, as he made another movement as if to withdraw. She even grasped his wrists, and held on to him.

The pretended count shrugged his shoulders, and then yawned.

"Oh, do say something!" she burst out, uncontrollably. "I am so suspicious and miserable! Have pity on me, Mauritius!"

He seemed to soften, and took her hands, looking into her eyes.

"Well, then," said he, "about my visiting the detective, without having advised you of my intention?"

"Yes."

"You had preceded me there."

"True; I will tell you about that presently."

"Well, as to my own visit, Gladys, are you blind, or is your woman's wit no longer at your command?"

"In what way?"

"In not having penetrated my motive in seeking the detective, and without your knowledge, at that."

"I don't quite follow you."

"Of course not!" half-scornfully, half-sorrowfully. "Any anxiety of mine in your behalf is not to be suspected."

"Oh! what do you mean?"

"Furblind and cruel! Is it so unnatural, then, that I should desire to secretly inform myself as to your safety—as to the state of the hostilities that Old Grip has declared against you in your step-daughter's interest?"

Gladys caught him in her arms.

"Oh, is this true?" she cried, joyfully. "Was such really your unselfish object in seeking an audience with the detective, Mauritius?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"Forgive me my distrust!" she exclaimed, covering his face with kisses, at which he could with difficulty restrain the manifestation of his loathing repugnance. "I am so happy again, Mauritius."

"There still remains; however," he said, after a pause, "the fact, as you say, of my having been with Leslie last night."

"Yes," half-doubtfully again, "that remains."

"But what of it?"

"Oh, nothing of consequence, I suppose."

"But there is something. What is it, signorina? I insist on knowing. Ought you not rather rejoice at my having made friends with the foolish young man, after the ridiculous exhibitions of his jealous dislike that he has so often treated me to here in your presence?"

"Yes; I suppose so. That is all well enough."

"Then what is not well enough? Don't trifle. What did Leslie tell you?"

"He said you acted so oddly."

"But in what way?"

"Well, he made some sarcastic allusions to the frequency of your visits here, and you either didn't or wouldn't understand it."

"What the deuce! would you that I should vaunt our familiarity in saloons and clubs, among roysterers and tipplers?"

"No, no!"

"What more, according to your parlous stepson, then?"

"Well, after you had treated his sarcastic allusions to the frequency of your visits here with a blank stare or two, you shrugged your shoulders, laughed and said: 'I'll tell you what it is, Hardy. You seem to be a trifle jealous of my headway with madame, your handsome step-mother, but you have perhaps less cause to be so than you imagine. Come, now; I sha'n't visit her again, unless in your company and under the wing of your approval.'"

The pretended count felt the ground almost giving way beneath his feet, but there was nothing for it but to trust in luck and hope.

"And what of that?" he exclaimed, contempt-

uously. "Anything to smooth the ruffled feathers of the young coxcomb, and, besides, I doubt not that we had both been imbibing more than was good for us."

Gladys's face partly cleared again, and she seemed to want to be wholly satisfied, whether she could be so persistently or not.

It was a time of critical emergencies. The detective conquered his invincible and steadily-growing repugnance to turn to her with a laugh and open his arms, when she incontinently nestled into them with a contented smile.

"Oh, why should I care for your mad words to Leslie, since you are with me again of your own inclination, and without waiting for the 'wing of his approval?' she laughingly murmured.

Old Grip closed his eyes for a moment and thought hard and fast. There was no blinking the dangers that were every moment staring him closer in the face. Every instant of delay was a fresh peril. He must force the game or lose all.

"So these are the trivial things," he said, at last, "that caused all the odd distrust of me that I remarked on my entrance here to-day?"

"Yes, yes, but I know you will forgive me, Mauritius."

"And there is nothing more?"

"No, no; how can you think it?"

"Then suppose you let me have that diary."

"All in good time, dearest."

He frowned. It was but natural that Gladys should be inordinately jealous of the self-announcing record of her criminal career—as natural, perhaps, as the unnaturalness, crunaccountableness, of her having written it at all; but her capricious stubbornness was growing both irksome and irritating in proportion as the necessity for the detective to get the record in his possession grew momentarily more urgent and vital. Still, continued patience and coolness were indispensable to him now, if never before.

"You haven't told me what you found out from the detective," continued Gladys.

"A man of iron!" was the somewhat brusque response. "Nevertheless, he gave me a sort of inkling of your interview with him, which so closely preceded mine. That was all. He would promise nothing in your behalf."

But Gladys's face wore a hopeful look.

"A man of iron, as you say," she observed, "but he at least promised me something, if only conditionally."

"Ah! and what?"

"That if Avic could be induced to treat with me, he would not advise her to the contrary. I live in the hope of conquering her animosity, after which all will be well for you and me, Mauritius."

And her hand stole softly into his.

They were occupying a sumptuous divan, with their backs partly toward a half-drawn portiere of crimson and gold, curtaining the entrance to a large adjoining drawing-room; and at this moment Johnson made her appearance through the latter to say something to her mistress about some millinery that had come in, subject to the latter's approval.

As she was passing out, after being dismissed, she threw a startled look at the detective, which he was at a loss to understand, though it speedily passed out of his recollection.

"Was it solely to obtain this concession that you sought the detective this morning?" he asked.

"Not altogether," replied Gladys, casting down her eyes beneath her companion's burning gaze.

"What other motive could you have had?"

"Can't you guess? It was to—to prepare him, and perhaps the public through him, for something that might possibly happen to—to my husband."

"Oh!" and it was all he could do to avoid springing once more to his feet with a partial denunciation on his lips.

"Yes, my poor husband! He may die in his sleep of heart failure at almost any time, you know."

She lifted her eyes to his.

The detective made a swift gesture that might mean almost anything.

"So; and how did Old Grip take this precious information?"

"He was simply surprised. Once, indeed, he started to his feet in an incomprehensible rage. But, altogether, I fancy I paved my way with some cleverness."

"Humph! doubtless."

"But this is the day, Mauritius, that you were to tell me whether I am to have your consent to—to my husband's removal," sinking her voice to a whisper, "or not?"

The pretended count could no longer sit, with hypocritical complacency, in the unconscionable woman's presence. He felt that he was undergoing moral suffocation, and yet could not lose sight of the vital object for which he was risking so much.

He rose abruptly.

"And this was the day you were to intrust your diary into my keeping!" he exclaimed, half-furiously. "Gladys, do you mean to stand by your promise, or do you not?"

She turned pale and reached her hand toward



her bosom, as if intending to produce the coveted record, but as instantly withdrew it.

"Oh, I cannot," she half-moaned, in an agony of hesitation. "Why did I ever write it? I don't know. But its loss or mislaying would give me up to the law—would destroy me. I cannot, Mauritius—I cannot!"

"You mean that you will not," contemptuously.

"Stay! Listen, Mauritius," with a new resolution. "Come with me to-night to the quarry-chamber. Then I will give it to you. I swear it!"

A disdainful gesture was her sole response. He had already taken his hat and came from off the piano.

"Wait!"

This time her hand was in her bosom, doubtless with the purpose of surrendering the book, when Mincing Meg suddenly put in another unexpected appearance, and placed her hand restrainingly on her mistress's wrist.

"Don't do it—don't be crazy!" fiercely exclaimed the woman, with her eyes turned menacingly toward the detective. "Let him come to-night for it, or go without it!"

The pretended count could not understand, but, as Gladys obeyed the rough injunction, and withdrew her hand without the book, he made a furious gesture, and turned to go.

"You will come with me to-night?" Gladys called after him, in an agony of hesitation. "The carriage will be in waiting at eight. Say that you will, Mauritius!"

"Yes, then!" was his husky answer, and he was gone.

As he was descending the stairs, he caught a glimpse of Boston Nell's face, with a warning, terrified look for him, which might have yet further increased his bewilderment, but that he was half-beside himself with disappointment and rage.

He hailed the first cab that was convenient, no longer daring to trust himself in public while supporting his fictitious character, and was driven away to his lodgings.

Ten minutes after he had reached the privacy of his room, with the somber intention of nursing his dissatisfaction at leisure, another cab was heard to drive furiously up to the house.

A moment later Boston Nell, bare-headed and looking wild, burst into the room, thrusting aside the servant with violence.

"All is lost!" she exclaimed. "Johnson saw your wig awry, and has advised Gladys of your identity. Gladys is fairly maniacal!"

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### THE TERRIBLE MISUNDERSTANDING.

NOTWITHSTANDING the fairly stunning nature of the intelligence brought to the detective by Boston Nell, the former's coolness quickly returned to him after the first shock of it all.

"Be calm, Nell," said he, authoritatively. "Now, tell me, are you sure that my exposure is assured, and that Gladys's eyes are thoroughly opened to the long deception I have been practicing upon her?"

"Sure!" echoed Eleanor. "If you could but see her tearing her hair, and raving for your heart's blood!"

"What will be her first step, think you?"

"She will manage to dissemble her revengeful intentions when you come again to-night. But, as sure as fate, if you go with her to the quarry-chamber to-night, you will go to your death. She means your murder, and nothing short."

Old Grip drew a long, deep breath, and smiled. He already experienced a sense of glorious relief in rising, if even through no effort of his own, out of that stifling atmosphere of disguise and double-dealing, which had so long been forced upon him in the interest of law and order, and was, moreover, beginning to hail the frank and open danger that was the consequence of his release, like the breath of a new life.

"No matter, Nell," said he, "I shall be there."

"You will?"

"Undoubtedly."

"It will be your death."

"No, no! it will be casting aside the mask at last, and confronting the worst, most unmitigated criminal on the face of the earth to her confusion and dismay!"

She would have said more, but he sternly silenced her.

"Now, as to yourself," he continued. "How did you manage to get away to me with this warning?"

"I made an excuse to slip out of the boudoir, stole out of the house by one of the basement doors, hailed a cab, hardly knowing what I was doing, and here I am."

"I am grateful for your zeal, Nell; but you may be missed—your mission even suspected."

"I think not—I hope not. I think I can manage to return without exciting suspicion."

"Dispatch, then! and remember, on your life, not a word of all this to a living soul—not even to Miss Avie."

The young woman hurried away, while Grip began to pace the floor of his chamber, full

of the exciting adventure that he doubted not was in store for him.

But there were yet to intervene strange and untoward interruptions to one course of his fixed anticipations, of which he could know nothing.

Eleanor Williams, for instance, had no sooner returned to her mistress's presence, having managed very cleverly in concealing her absence, as she thought, when she perceived that her good faith was already under suspicion.

Gladys had by this time recovered her composure, though a composure of a very deadly sort, notwithstanding that she was still disheveled, together with other indications of the tempest of hate, fury and blood-craving resentment through which she was newly passed.

"Williams, where have you been?" she demanded, the instant Boston Nell put in an appearance.

Meg, who was busy with repairs upon her mistress's coiffure, also looked up venomously, while Romany Ralph peeped in on the scene from behind the crimson and gold *portière*.

"I have been to my dressmaker, ma'm," replied Nell, promptly. "You frightened me by taking on as you did, and then I remember having promised Mrs. Kelly to go to her to be fitted at five this afternoon."

"It's a lie!" snapped out Meg. "My life on it, Gyp, she's Old Grip's spy, and has been from the first! He hadn't been gone five minutes in his disguise before I saw her scudding around the corner, bare-headed, doubtless to carry him warning."

Eleanor was an adept at dissembling. She put on a shocked and puzzled air.

"I don't know who or what you are talking about, Miss Johnson," said she. "But this I do know, that if you intimate that I'm a liar again or that I am anything but grateful to my dear lady yonder, I'll—well, you'll find me a woman able to protect and help myself. That's all."

But Gladys, whose eyes were like live coals amid the ghastly pallor of her face, was no more to be imposed on than was her tire-woman.

"Williams, your actions have been very suspicious," she observed, with deadly calmness. "So important is it to me that the vile masquerader who has been deceiving me should have no inkling of my having pierced his disguise, that I shall be compelled to take every precaution. You must submit to being restrained of your liberty, at least for a time."

"May it please you, ma'm, but I'll just submit to nothing of the sort!" cried Nell, whose blood was up.

"If I wrong you by my suspicions, I'll make ample amends to you hereafter, Williams," continued the Lady of the Frozen Smile. "But for the present you must excuse me if I treat you as a spy and an enemy on the venture."

At this juncture Mincing Meg suddenly precipitated herself upon the ex-shapliker and bore her to the floor.

The latter, however, had been trained in no delicate school, and she made such a good battle for her liberty that Meg would doubtless have been worsted if Romany Ralph had not lent his assistance.

Between them they managed to secure the young woman, after a hard tussle.

"The bath-room is well-guarded," said Gladys, quietly. "Let her be confined there for the present."

"I'll have the law on you!" screamed Nell, as she was being dragged away. "You're nothing but an adventuress yourself, for all your jewels and grand airs. I sized you up when I first clapped eyes on you."

Gladys did not go down to dinner that day, but as the hour approached for her appointed drive with the pretended Montalvo she roamed restlessly about her rooms, superbly attired as was her wont, and giving no outward evidences of the hell of rage and thirst for revenge that boiled in her heart.

Every now and then she would make a nervous pause, her jeweled hands clinching, her gaze fastened upon the slow minute-hand of her ormolu clock.

"Will he come?" she would mutter to herself.

"Oh, yes! the Powers of Vengeance would not be so cruel as to whisper him a warning of what I know, or cheat me of my just revenge. What! even now I can scarcely realize it. Old Grip, himself, my bitterest enemy, all these days and weeks in that cunning disguise, worming himself into my heart's core, mastering my darkest secrets, insulting me in my love, the very citadel of my womanhood! Shame, shame! Small wonder he was so mad to possess my Diary—to hang me with—after obtaining my opal, in the flash of which the Followers themselves will cower at his feet. Wrath, ruin and despair! let him but come to me to-night, unsuspecting, self-assured. 'Tis all I ask!"

Another glance at the clock. A quarter to eight, with word from Footman Ralph that the carriage is in waiting at the door.

Another quarter of an hour!

But hold! is he not already come? Yes; Leslie's voice on the stair, and the count's imperfect English in response. Yes; he is come.

And, smiling in her queenly beauty, she swept

across the floor, as the door opened to admit Leslie and the real Count Montalvo.

But the imitation had been so perfect that she did not for an instant suspect the truth.

"You are a few minutes before your engagement with me, count, but it is just as well," said Gladys, gayly, after responding to Leslie's greeting and explanation. "Come; the carriage is waiting."

"Oh! a prior engagement, eh?" observed Leslie, with a puzzled look from one to the other. "Then I'm *de trop* as a matter of course. You might have mentioned the fact to me, count, but a pleasant evening to you just the same."

And he withdrew in a better humor than he would have manifested before experiencing the quality of her ladyship's claws.

The count had remained in smiling expectancy, feeling himself the hero of a strange and fortunate misapprehension, not one iota of whose zest did he intend to lose by any explanation or display of unfamiliarity on his own part.

He now advanced and kissed the lady's hand, murmuring some compliment, coupled with the title "signorina," just as his counterfeit might have done.

Gladys, on her part, noted with surprise that the count's breath was heavily charged with brandy—strange that this had never occurred to her before—but that was all, and she was too eager for her revenge to care for such lapses.

"Shall we be going?" and she bent her shoulders to receive her wrap at his hands. "Come, then, my Mauritius!" with a falsely ravishing glance.

The real count smiled again, looked inordinately eager, held his peace, and followed.

How utterly beautiful she was, and what a lucky fellow was he, the count, then doubtless standing in his double's shoes! Unfortunate double! the count could almost forgive him his impudence for this exquisite privilege, this charming misunderstanding.

As they got into the coach, and were driven away, neither of them remarked a man, in the count's own image, who had shrunk, pale as death, into the shadow of the garden wall, at the sight of the fatal misapprehension that was being perpetrated.

It was Old Grip, who had arrived exactly on the stroke of eight, but only to perceive his prototype going perhaps to his death in his, the detective's, place, and as to a masque.

He remained for some moments as if paralyzed at the discovery, the whole meaning and explanation of the extraordinary misunderstanding only gradually making themselves apparent in his mind.

But, come what might, the unfortunate count must be rescued from the consequences of the complication, of whose tragic nature he could, of course, have no conception.

Rousing himself from his horrified apathy, the detective tore off his wig and silky false beard, and rushed away to take such measures for the count's safety, and the Frozen Smile's defeat, as might be hastily devised.

In the mean time, the seemingly lucky dog of a rake, Count Montalvo, was congratulating himself more and more upon his adventure.

The lady seemed averse to talking, but she was at least complacent under his mute or softly-whispered gallantries, till he was fairly beside himself with the rosiest anticipations; and at the same time little short of fox-like in his own taciturnity.

Oh, yes! he would pluck the rich fruit of this misapprehension, so ready to his hand, but he would keep his own counsel. No unguarded word of his should apprise the fair dame of her mistake. Till the last she should imagine him the lover that he was so plausibly counterfeiting, and who was doubtless the very rascal that had personated him, the count, so impudently. What a turning of the tables! and, taken all in all, was ever such a unique, such a glorious, such a marvelous intrigue?

As for Gladys, with her love turned to gall, brimming only with hatred and resentment, she maintained a somber and self-engrossing silence, than which nothing could have been better calculated to further the misconception of which she was likewise the victim.

The hand-kissings and even bolder advances that were occasionally ventured upon by her companion, were not distasteful, inasmuch as they merely evinced, as she deemed, the depth of false security into which he was lulled, and from which her avenging dagger should so rudely and so bloodily arouse him.

They quitted the carriage at last, and under her guidance, passed through the trees and among the rocks, in the direction of the masked passage.

It was a night of storm and rain, and both were under one umbrella, the count's, which compelled them to press close together, while groping and stepping gingerly here and there.

"*Diavolo!*" thought the count: "what sort of devil's rendezvous can the adorable step-mother of my friend be leading me to?"

But he persisted in his determination to ask no questions, and affected to be as familiar with the rough way as the lady herself.



Near a small shanty at the edge of the working quarry, a number of rough-looking men, some of them with lanterns, were standing in the rain.

"The ring!" murmured Gladys, in momentary trepidation; "you have got it, count. Flash the opal upon them!"

"The ring!" echoed the count, taken by surprise for an instant.

"Of course; the opal—my opal. Be quick about it. These ruffians are dangerous on occasion."

The count struck his forehead with his hand.

"*Corpo di Bacco!* that I should have left it lying on my dressing-case!" he exclaimed.

"What! the ring—the opal?"

"Alas, yes! Forgive me, signorina; I deserve nothing short of death for my stupidity."

"Your deserts are close at hand, then," said Gladys to herself; and going up to one of the men, who fortunately proved to be Bigor, she managed to dispense with the flash of the ring and to procure a lantern.

A few minutes later she stood alone with the count in the great fire-lighted quarry-chamber.

She was so sure of him now that she did not even take the trouble to fasten the passage-door behind them.

"Villain!" she exclaimed at last, "your treachery is known to me. I have brought you here to destroy you!"

And the change that had taken place in her voice, no less than her appearance, was absolutely appalling.

#### CHAPTER XXXIX.

##### TO HIS DEATH.

THE count, who had been in the act of offering some yet more pronounced endearment, was less startled than wonder-struck at the lightning-like change in his lovely companion.

At first he felt sure that she must have suddenly taken leave of her senses.

"Fascinating signorina! ravishing dear one!" he exclaimed, soothingly, and at the same time laughingly; "what wild caprice is this? Come, let us be on gentler terms!"

And he even made a caressing movement.

Gladys's fury was so excessive as to blind her to certain differences of manner and speech, which otherwise would now have been apparent to her.

"Don't touch me!" she hissed; "don't dare do it, on your life!"

She had thrown back her rich furred mantle, revealing the magnificence of her evening toilette. One jeweled hand was already thrust into the bosom of her dress. Her form was palpitating, her dark face on fire, with the ungovernable thirst for revenge that was possessing her. Verily a superb demoness, a beautiful fiend! And still in her face, with its eerie, mocking light, the swift flickering of her phantom smile.

But the gambler was not to be warned. Blasé to the core, his passions were aroused to the highest pitch by the superb diabolism of her beauty, combined with the unexpected picturesqueness of their surroundings, which perhaps he did not care to understand.

"By my patron saint, you are simply magnificent!" he exclaimed, with enthusiasm. "Angeli thou art one that a prince might die for."

"Content yourself, scoundrell! You, for one, will die for me, and soon enough!"

"Ah! my demoness, my divine fury, if I might but first clasp that lovely form, feast my lips on those delirious charms!"

She made a wild gesture with her disengaged hand.

"Accursed detective! will you not recognize that I have penetrated the mask under which you have won my woman's heart, my profoundest confidence?"

"I a detective?"

He began to give way to his wonder now.

"Traitor! would you think to still brave it out?"

Montalvo only shrugged his shoulders, pityingly.

"You thought to obtain my diary, as you obtained my ring—the diary which I even now carry in my bosom, and which in your hands would so readily consign me to the hangman's clutch. Ha, ha, ha! Wretch, you at last turn pale and tremble!"

"*Diavolo!* no wonder that I do," half faltered the count, who now when too late began to suspect something of the inextricable trap into which he had blundered so egotistically. "Actually, I am all at sea. Here is some dreadful mistake. Signorina, I must protest—"

But his words had only served to madden her, and her hand was already withdrawn from her bosom, the dagger glittering in its clutch.

The count uttered an alarmed exclamation, and, retreating a step or two toward the half ajar door of the passage, he drew with trembling hand a small revolver.

But already she was upon him with her tiger-spring, and at the same instant her dagger was in his heart.

She was merciless, insatiable. Even as he tottered in death, and before he could measure

his lifeless length on the ground, again and again did the remorseless weapon pierce the defenseless breast.

Dead at last! There was a sated, devilishly triumphant look in her face. With her foot spurning planted upon the corse, she raised her eyes to the cavern's roof, and shook the yet reeking blade.

"Powers of Darkness, I thank ye!" she cried. "Oh, I am my old self again!" Then, looking down exultantly on the body: "By my life, I can scarcely realize it! Dead, powerless at last, he, Old Grip, the great detective, the remorseless sleuth-hound of my career, my life-long foe, whom I so hated and so feared! Dead, dead, dead! Good! it is almost too good to be credible. I have but to seal up this subterranean den till my followers can dispose of the remains, and then all will be well. The detective will merely have mysteriously disappeared, to be known of on earth and by men no more."

A light swift step in the passage startled her, and she looked up.

Then, with bloodless face and a hoarse, choking cry, she staggered back across the firelight agast, the bloody dagger dropping from her hand.

Old Grip, the great detective, was standing in the passage entrance.

Panting and pale, a single glance at the tragic scene before him was explanatory of its awful significance to his appalled consciousness.

He had done his best, and was yet too late to interrupt, to save.

Yet another blameless victim had met the death intended for himself, and yet through no fault of his, for each fatality had chanced in the legitimate exercise of his crime-detecting, society-guarding profession.

But the thought was maddening beyond expression.

"Inhuman woman!" he yelled; "it is the real count, the true Montalvo, you have slain. But think not to escape the consequences of your manifold misdeeds. As in the past, so now am I society's avenger in your horrible case!"

He darted toward her. But Gladys had by this time recovered her nerve, and she eluded him with cat-like activity.

Finally she darted under his arm, and gained the passage before he could fairly continue his pursuit.

Then the heavy door was closed and locked in his face, he heard her footsteps flying along the passage, and he was a prisoner with the dead.

#### CHAPTER XL.

##### THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

BUT the detective's first sensation, after fully realizing the horror and embarrassment of his situation, was one of joy.

A small, compact object, like a book, caught his eye lying on the ground near the body of the murdered man.

He seized it, with a hopeful exclamation, and a cursory examination by the ruddy firelight was sufficient to confirm his joy.

It was the coveted diary, which Gladys had inadvertently dislodged from its place of concealment in drawing her dagger.

Old Grip scanned enough of the contents of the thin, closely-written pages to assure himself that the record was all that he had hoped for, as a self-incrimination of the writer in all the misdeeds of her guilt-fraught career, and then secured the precious little volume in his own bosom.

Then to make his way out of the quarry-chamber! He knew where he had left a squad of policemen in the lots outside, but hesitated at being found by them in such a place and in the dead man's company. It might compel a large amount of explanation, and now time was of the utmost value to him, if he would, as he hoped and intended, arrest Gladys in her own home, before she could have thoroughly rehabilitated her nerve and resolution.

He tried the door of the passage, but gave up all idea of the practicability of forcing it on the instant.

Then he bethought himself of the cell-door in the face of the rocky wall, whose secret had been partly revealed to him.

Approaching the spot, he pressed his foot over the ground systematically.

At last the hidden spring was touched by chance, the rock opened in obedience to the pressure, and the interior of the luxurious cell was revealed.

He hurriedly entered, and began searching for that other spring which Gladys had said would open communication with an underground passage leading off into the open lots a quarter of a mile distant.

He remembered that it was that portion of the tapestried wall occupied by the picture of Cleopatra's Barge which she had approached with extended hand just before relinquishing the intention of showing him the secret, and it was there that he now directed his efforts.

But in vain. He even took down the picture and tore out the hangings, but, search as he would, with his professional expertness to aid

him, there was no spring in the wall that he could discover.

Then he tried the floor, but with no better success.

While thus engaged he was made aware of the rushing approach of many trampling feet in the main passage.

Could that be his squad of police, hastening to his rescue? Hardly; for he had merely pointed out the masked entrance to them from a considerable distance through the driving storm, and, moreover, they would be only likely to come to him in response to his preconcerted signal.

He sprang into the center of the cave as the door was burst, and the Followers, with Bigor at their head, came rushing furiously into view.

It was evident at a glance that, even without the magic of her opal ring, Gladys had succeeded in inflaming the Followers in her favor, and that they were come to murder the detective at her behest.

All were armed to the teeth, their faces flushed with drink, their gestures furiously hostile.

"Upon him!" shouted the brutish Bigor. "See!" pointing with his bludgeon toward the dead body, "our mistress spoke truly. Yonder's the corpse of the man he murdered just before trying to cut her throat, too. Upon him! Tear him to pieces! hammer him to death!"

With a simultaneous howl, and brandishing their weapons, they launched themselves toward the detective in a serried body.

But at that instant the detective, in drawing his revolver, and all unconsciously, flashed upon them the opal ring.

It seemed to gather the fire-gleams into its lustrous heart, and then hurl them back into those savage faces like dazzling points of silver and gold and steel, while the encircling rubies clung around the gleaming source of it all like gouts of blood transfused with sullen flame.

Midway in their fierce onset, the Followers hung back, astounded and dismayed.

"Curse you for poltroons!" roared Bigor, who was the first to recover from his surprise. "He has no right to the magic ring, and may have forced it from our dear mistress. Upon him, I say!"

But Old Grip caused the opal to dazzle again and again, and the ruffians continued to hesitate.

"Followers, respect the symbol!" he cried, exultingly. "Ye are bound by oath—ye dare not disregard it. How do Followers assemble?"

"At the Flash of the Ring!" shouted the majority, as if from long habit.

"Don't forget that, Followers," continued the detective. "Ye owe me homage by this sign, and I shall exact it."

But the dwarfish Bigor was still rebellious, others began to take sides with him, and it speedily became evident that even the power of the ring would not much longer interrupt their hostile intentions, at the remembered bidding of their terrible mistress.

The detective placed his back against the wall, slipped a whistle to his lips, and suddenly sounded three successive ear-splitting blasts, that well-nigh rivaled a locomotive's champion scream.

The astounded Followers fairly hopped on the ground, with their hands to their ears.

"Treachery!" bellowed Bigor, as there came on the heels of the last blast the sound of a fresh trampling through the passage. "Kill him now, and make an end!"

But even then the blue-coats were among them, ding-dong, clubs were trumps on the instant, with no call for anything but face-cards, and it seemed that in less than three minutes there was not an unbroken head among the ruffianly band, nor one of them that had not measured his length upon the ground.

Old Grip hastily explained the situation to the roundsman in command of the squad.

"No time is now to be lost," he added, "if the woman's flight is to be interrupted, for I am certain she will attempt a flight. I want two officers to accompany me."

The officers were placed at his disposal, and in their company he quitted the sanguinary scene, and proceeded at once to Mr. Hardy's house.

To Old Grip's astonishment, the drawing-rooms were lighted up, and there were sounds of music and pleasant voices from within.

He at last succeeded in quietly communicating, through one of the servants, with Eleanor Williams, who had succeeded in effecting her escape from her place of confinement an hour or two before.

She was still wrathful over the indignities she had endured, and would have forthwith overwhelmed the detective with a detailed account of them, but that he silenced her with a peremptory gesture.

There was also something in his hard, set face, to say nothing of the policemen accompanying him, that must have afforded her some inkling as to the crisis at hand.

Old Mr. Hardy was feeling so improved in health this evening that he was holding a sort of family gathering in celebration of the event. Both Avie and Leslie were doing their best to make it pleasant for the invalid; the St. Johns, brother and sister, were there; and, *mirabile*



dictu! Gladys, who had come home from her drive an hour before, was at the piano for her "dear, good husband's" special delectation.

Old Grip could scarcely believe what he heard. But he did not even yet appreciate the absolute desperateness of La Belle Dame du Souris Glacé; and, even as he marveled, some rich chords were heard struck out of the piano by an assured hand, and then the melodious contralto voice that he knew so well, but had never until that moment listened to in song, rose throbbing and rippling in the pathos and the passion of "Douglas, Douglas, tender and true."

The intruders were in the basement passage, whither Eleanor had noiselessly come down to them, without disturbing the household.

"Where are Meg and Ralph?" demanded the detective.

"In my lady's apartments, packing up everything they can lay their hands on as if for dear life. I have no doubt she meditates a secret flight at the earliest opportunity."

Old Grip beckoned the officers to one side, and whispered his instructions.

## CHAPTER XLII.

### CONCLUSION.

IN obedience to the detective's instructions, the officers slipped quietly up-stairs, were so fortunate as to meet none of the servants, and gained Gladys's private apartments.

There both Romany Ralph and Mincing Meg were taken into custody without any disturbance—indeed they were so thoroughly surprised as to be incapable of immediate resistance, and certain timely threats, together with the uniforms of the officers, had effected the rest—after which one of the policemen returned to the detective.

A few moments later, having sent Boston Nell up-stairs, and posted the policeman just outside the door, Old Grip summarily entered the drawing-room.

Mr. Hardy, who was reclining in an invalid-chair, with his gouty foot supported by cushions, and Leslie, who was in the act of turning the music for Gladys, greeted the intrusion with a blank stare of astonishment.

Avice and the St. Johns, who could at least suspect the truth, turned somewhat pale, but remained composed.

As for Gladys, her action was little short of the incredible. She was in the midst of her song when the apparition of the detective rose before her eyes, and she must have fully recognized that her course was run; but not an eyelid quivered, there was not an added flutter to the weird, mysterious smile that was the haunting characteristic of her dark beauty, and she steadily finished the stanza she was singing without an increased tremor of her magnificent voice.

She had risen from the instrument with a perfect affectation of astonishment at the detective's intrusion, glancing with apparent bewilderment from Mr. Hardy to Leslie, and then to the others.

But before she could speak, as was evidently her intention, the detective had taken his cue, and was literally pouring forth his story of her crimes.

Abrupt but calm, eloquent but terse, the awful record flowed from his lips in an uninterrupted stream. In five minutes he had almost completed his sketch of the terrible creature's terrible career, from what was perhaps the initial crime of her early youth in distant Georgia to the ruthless assassination of that night, still so redly fresh upon her jeweled hands.

Mr. Hardy had almost fainted under the narration, while the other listeners—with the single exception of Gladys herself, who had not changed an iota of her admirably sustained bewilderment, so to speak—were scarcely less painfully affected.

"Good God!" faltered the old gentleman, starting upright in his chair; "can this be true?"

"More than I have related of the woman is true," replied the detective, in his severe manner.

"I presume, sir," interposed Leslie, who was very white and steadily avoided looking at Gladys, "that you would not venture to make these appalling charges without absolute proof as to their truth."

"You are right, sir; I would not," continued Grippon. "Witnesses are not wanting to attest the truth of everything that I have charged. Circumstantial evidence of the most convincing character is not wanting. And, lastly, documentary evidence, in the shape of the woman's written confession of her crimes, is at hand."

"Documentary evidence!"

"Yes; behold!"

And he forthwith produced the telltale diary! Gladys, who had remained imperturbable, was seen to wince a little now, but it was only for an instant.

"What is that book?" demanded Leslie.

"The accused woman's diary," replied the detective. "By some inexplicable fatuity, which

is, nevertheless, not infrequently the accompaniment of criminality, even among the shrewdest and most intellectually depraved, this woman has kept a periodical record of her career, in which she narrates her crimes and misdoings to the minutest particular. That record is here in my hand."

Leslie sunk back in his seat and buried his face in his hands.

"It hardly seems credible!" he half-sobbed. "I cannot realize it."

The old merchant, who had sunk into a sort of dazed stupor, suddenly roused himself, like one endeavoring to break away from a nightmare.

"Heavens!" he faltered; "and I have loved this creature—trusted her—called her wife!"

Grippon looked at him with the profoundest sympathy and commiseration.

"Sir," said he, "remember, from what I have set forth, that she is not and could never have been your wife. No more could she have been the lawful consort of the unfortunate English gentleman whose victimization at the altar preceded your own. Her first husband, from whom she had never been divorced, was living at the time she contracted those alliances, and she was perfectly aware of it. He, Joseph Farley, was identical with the miserable tramp who was found dying in your conservatory, at this woman's feet, on the night of the *bal masque*—poisoned by this woman's hands!"

For the first time since the charges began, Gladys gave utterance to a sound—a derisive laugh.

"Proofs of everything charged shall be duly forthcoming," went on the detective. "The dead man's stomach, on being secretly analyzed, betrayed the presence of a violent poison, such as had been previously purchased at this woman's instance. More of the same was found in the champagne bottle from which she had administered the wine, after receiving it from her minion, Richards—her half-brother, Romany Ralph. That the poor wretch was this woman's true husband, I have the proofs here." He produced the pocketbook. "It was taken from the dead man, and contains papers indisputably in proof of what I assert."

As he finished speaking, a dead silence fell upon the group, more painful than is often witnessed in the saddest tragedies of real life.

It was broken by Gladys composedly returning to the piano, where, still standing, she ran over the keys with the fingers of one hand, extemporizing a score or more of brilliant chords.

Then, turning, with a gentle, injured glance, that comprehended all present, she undulated slowly to the door, with the grace of a Castilian and the bearing of an empress.

"Hold!" shouted Mr. Hardy, in a harsh, unnatural voice, that, nevertheless, had something half-imploing in it. "Woman! I charge you stay, and answer these charges."

She paused, regarding him with the deepest respect, and yet with a strange tenderness.

"Charges, Wallace!" she echoed. "What charges? You surely would not dignify the insane fabrications of this hireling wretch," with a contemptuous gesture toward the detective, "with such a name! Charges! Why, were I no woman at all, but a fiend incarnate, I could not have perpetrated the deeds he has enumerated. No, no, Papa Wallace, I cannot stay at even your precious bidding."

The detective offered no interposition as she again approached the door.

But upon opening it, and perceiving the stalwart uniformed policeman barring the passage, she shrunk back, with something like a gasp, and for the first time suggested a weakening of her iron nerve.

She almost instantly recovered herself, however, and turned to the detective haughtily.

"Am I to consider myself under arrest?" she asked.

"Most assuredly."

"Will you permit me to go to my rooms to make some preparations?"

"Under guard, yes."

She swept across the floor, kissed Mr. Hardy before he could be aware of her intention, and returned.

"You have a ring of mine," she said, as Grippon held the door open for her. "I presume you will not deny my right to it."

Without a word, he handed her the beautiful opal, which shot fire as she slipped it on her finger with a sort of loving gracefulness, and she passed up-stairs under the policeman's escort.

The detective was about to retire, when Mr. Hardy piteously signed him to stay.

"Sir," said he, brokenly, "you see before you a disgraced and miserable man, though it is through no fault of yours that this righteous and necessary exposure was brought about and must be made public. You will oblige me, if you will give a more ample account of your connection with this terrible case than you have yet stated."

The detective was not a little surprised at the request, but, after a moment's reflection, he replied, with much gravity:

"Sir, I consider it my duty to comply with your desire, but before doing so I wish to extend a hope to the effect that this exposure—at pres-

ent confined to the circle of your family and close friends—may not necessarily entail social scandal and notoriety that you naturally so much dread."

"What do you mean?" cried the old merchant, while both Avice and Leslie looked up eagerly.

"At the present moment I cannot explain."

"But, can there be an arrest, trial, conviction, and—and—" the word seemed to half-choke the old gentleman's utterance—"the ignominious end, without the horrible publicity that we dread?"

"Assuredly not. I only ask you to wait."

And with these rather enigmatical words, the detective began the narration, as requested.

It consumed at least half an hour, and when he had finished there was still no word from upstairs.

At this juncture the policeman who had taken Gladys under guard made his appearance, with much seriousness in his honest face.

"I fear there is something wrong, sir," said he, addressing the detective.

"Explain, please."

"The lady beseeched me to let her go into her boudoir alone. I did so, and heard her moving around a bit. But for the last ten minutes there hasn't been a sound, and I find she has locked both communicating doors."

Grippon signed Leslie and St. John to accompany him, and gave Avice a look, as much as to say:

"This is what I meant."

They proceeded up-stairs, and knocked loudly, but without receiving a response, at the communicating door between the private drawing-room and the boudoir.

Then they burst open the door.

She lay as if asleep on the richest divan of the sumptuous room, a gentle, composed look on the drooping eyelids and sweet lineaments of the upturned face, upon which the strange, mysterious smile was frozen indeed at last, never to be thawed again, save at the slow touch of "decay's effacing fingers."

She was quite dead. Clapsed between the thumb and middle finger of the right hand was the wonderful opal ring, but with the stone turned outward from its setting, like the lid of a fairy cup.

The cavity still contained a few drops of some colorless, strangely-smelling liquid, and it was doubtless of this that she had drank her death.

\* \* \* \* \*

But little more remains to be told. The task is done, the tale hath ceased, the theme has died into an echo.

As old Grip had obscurely foreshadowed, in anticipating the suicide of Gladys, by money and influence the Hardy family was enabled to forego much of the unwelcome notoriety that might otherwise have been suffered through the woman's death, and the revelations consequent thereon.

Indeed, the detailed history of that awful career have never been made public, and doubtless never will, though the diary is still in the hands of Old Grip.

Romany Ralph, alias Richards, was duly brought to trial for the murder of Mr. Vanderhuysen. He was found guilty and sentenced to death, but found means to cheat the hangman by committing suicide in his prison-cell, and he died close-lipped.

Mincing Meg, alias Johnson, was suffered to disappear into obscurity, which she did, probably for a consideration, without making any sign as to that crime-stained past in which the Lady of the Frozen Smile had figured so conspicuously and so tragically.

Avice Hardy kept her word as to befriending Eleanor Williams, alias Boston Nell, and the ex-shoplifter has given evidence of deserving the benefaction. She is now the head matron of a Western reformatory for wayward girls and young women, honest and respected in her position, with a small assured income outside of it; and her little boy is doing promisingly in a boarding-academy not far from the town of his mother's residence.

Mr. Hardy survived the blow attendant upon Gladys's exposure but a few months, and then passed away, leaving his great fortune in equal shares to his two children.

Avice Hardy and Herbert St. John were happily married a year later, and have since then lived mostly in Europe.

Mary St. John is with them, chiefly, it is said, to escape the unwelcome attentions of Leslie Hardy, who has persisted in making her numerous offers of his hand and heart, only to be firmly and steadfastly refused.

It is to be hoped that she will continue refusing him. The hands of such young men as Leslie Hardy are of exceeding small account, even when gold-lined, and, as for their hearts, they haven't much of any worth mentioning!

As for Grippon, he was amply rewarded for his services, and, as Old Grip, is still at the old stand, ready for any fresh adventures in the cause of law and order, and with the faithful Cheese-it still as his attendant sprite.

THE END.



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